

Navigating development:
The case of the nonprofit documentary production company STEPS

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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Abstract

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Global South that work in development are said to operate autonomously from their governments yet their very existence depends largely on dominant bureaucratic bodies – mostly Northern influencers. Indeed, many Southern NGOs are dissatisfied with the sector due to these structural and institutional forces that can be exclusionary, dominating and restricting to their autonomy, affecting the organization's sustainability as leaders within their civil societies. I have ventured to explore how one Southern NGO contends with such an environment. Through conducting an ethnography on Social Transformation and Empowerment Projects (STEPS), a non-profit documentary production company based in Cape Town, South Africa, I have explored how they navigate within these confines. I have investigated what tacit rules they adhere to in order to remain operational in the sector while also exploring what other rules they attempt to subvert in order to emancipate themselves from these structural forces. This dissertation investigates power struggles in line with Foucault's (1980) theoretical framing on how power exists everywhere and in everything. This study also employs Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus* and Vigh's (2009) utilization of the concept of *navigation* as ways to gain a deeper introspection into how these particular practitioners negotiate their positionality within development. Overall, I argue that central to how STEPS navigate the terrain of a contentious development field rest primarily in key decision-makers within the organization. The nature of these practitioners as informed by their life histories has created dispositions that not only inform their agency as individuals but also transfer to their organization (culture, structure, vision, ideologies, ambition). Despite external structures that can also act as roadblocks or allies in actions, choices and agency, the *habitus* of these prominent figures within the organization are key to actions of the collective when presented with negative or positive structural forces.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.0 Background

The main objective of this study is to gain an understanding of how Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from the Global South navigate the shifts, prescriptions and unpredictability of the development sector largely dominated by their distant Northern counterparts. Presently, development is in a “post-impasse trend” (Booth, 1994; Schuurman, 1993; both cited by Pieterse, 2010:12) where discourse and practice has shifted from the sole dominance of its economic heavy beginnings in the 1950s onwards, to one that now includes alternative development and rights-based approaches (RBAs). Within these new shifts, however, lie many of the same practices and ideologies that give rise to critiques by post-development scholars (*cf.* Edelman and Haugerud, 2005; Escobar 1995; Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997 *for prominent collections*), grass roots activists, and stakeholders working from less empowered positions within the field as those being examined within this study. Funding comes from *above*, themes come from *above*, practices are imposed from *above*. To what extent does this development food chain consider and absorb knowledge from ‘below’ (the local experience and ideas) into its framing, planning and doing? As well, considering these power dynamics, how then does the stakeholders at the bottom adapt the mainstream discourses and practices to their specific context and what ways do they attempt to circumvent them?

By means of an ethnographic case study of Social Transformation and Empowerment Projects (STEPS), a media advocacy NGO based in Cape Town, South Africa, exploring their engagement with the development apparatus, I aim to understand how they negotiate the precarity within the sector. The concept of *power*, as theorized by Foucault (1980), is intrinsic in the discourse and practices of development. Vigh’s (2009) concept of *navigation* further helps to frame these struggles. It refers “to how people act in difficult or uncertain circumstances...describing how they disentangle themselves from confining structures” (ibid:419). Similarly, in her feminist critique of Arab women Gallant (2008) explores contending with dominating power structures concluding that, in

fact, “we are not inactive subjects in this process but we can play an important part in repositioning ourselves” (Francis, 1999; cited in Gallant, 2008:246). I am examining STEPS’ positionality within the development space in a similar way. My research query examines the praxis of practitioners from an organizational standpoint where I am interested to see how their characters, ideologies and ethos inform this. My research question is:

How do STEPS practitioners navigate the dominant discourses and practices of a mainstream development apparatus as individuals and a collective group within the development space?

I have come to understand that the very nature of people’s *being*, their *habitus*, informs their agency and aids in shaping their practices (Bourdieu, 1977; Rossi, 2004; Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008). Not only that, but from my observations, I deduce that there are key decision-makers within STEPS who have greater influences over the practices of the organization than others. The way the organization will navigate within the development sector in South Africa and globally -- conservative or subversive strategies, how much they will resist, conform, or challenge, how they will go about collaboration and partnerships, choices in organizational structure, informing organizational culture – depends on just how these key individuals perceive the world (development, South Africa, global society) they are positioned in and their part to play in it. Centrally, I situate my research with scholarly work looking at shifts in development thinking and practice, primarily, alternative development (Pieterse, 2010; Friedmann, 1992; Edelman and Haugerud, 2005; Escobar, 2005; Matthews, 2007) and rights-based approaches to development (VeneKlasen et al., 2004:1; Nyamu-Musembi, 2002; Nyamu-Musembi and Cornwall, 2004).

1.1 The problématique of development for the Southern NGO

Escobar (1995) examining the historical makings of development proclaims it a nightmarish myth connecting its institutional origins to U.S. President Harry Truman’s

speech in 1949. For stakeholders working in the Global South, the problem manifest in what he calls the “geopolitical imagination” (ibid:9) of development thought where power is intrinsically situated in a particular geographic location. Similarly, McFarlane (2006:1413) talks about the “categorisation [sic]” in development steeped in politics. Escobar (ibid:9) points to the articulation of these arguments in the constructed notions of the less developed “*Third* [emphasis added] World” to the more advanced “First” World or the Global “North” and its polar opposite Global “South,” all categories that produce and enforce ideas of “differences, subjectivities, and social orders.”

As explained in McFarlane (2006) both poles of development from the mainstream to its alternative form have changed the landscape of global society according to the institutions and ideologies of development in what we know as the North-South divide, pointing to the most dominant critique of development that exist – the one way flow of prescriptive knowledge from the wealthier North to the developing South. He posits that the issue lies with how the North perceives the South, rarely as a base for knowledge to travel from but rather for it to travel to. This he conjectures “is underwritten by the organisation [sic] of knowledge production in the Euro-American academy” (ibid:1419). As such, development discourse and practice tend to be framed as a unilateral process – those who develop and those who are to be developed and this is the key issue with the apparatus for the Southern NGO.

As a result, development that centers largely on an apparatus that claims to empower people, seemingly disempower the very organizations that work within the space by creating an environment where they are unable to operate independently from the dominant power structures and institutional ideologies within the field. Considering the apparatus was largely institutionalized by the North and has spread like wildfire across the global landscapes of Africa, Asia and Latin America, the most dominant structures remain – the international donor NGOs, their governments and regulatory bodies like the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions (i.e., the IMF and the World Bank). Despite the fact that Southern NGOs have a key role in the development narrative in and of themselves, they are cast as implementing *partners* in their home countries for multi- and

intra-national dominant stakeholders like the aforementioned largely due to the latter's economic capital. This can create a lack of autonomy afforded to civil servants where they are confined to prescriptive approaches to development that may not be inline with the specificities of their own societies (e.g., post-apartheid South Africa) limiting the potential of Southern NGOs, in particular, to operate optimally. My research aims to explore recourses taken by them to navigate a development field, that irrespective of its move away from being dominated by the rhetoric of IMF structural adjustment programs, still restrict and confines stakeholders in the South through agenda-setting, one-directional discourse, funding competition and so on and so forth.

1.2 Contextualizing the development field in South Africa for the development practitioner

When I mention the context in which the Southern NGO development practitioner works, I am referring to the specificities of the socio-political practicalities of their societies. In South Africa, for instance, there are an upwards of 100,000 registered non-profits operating within a sector largely molded by their apartheid and post-apartheid history (Stuart, 2013). A report done by the Coalition on Civil Society Resource Mobilisation (2012:5) found that presently, funding, the lifeblood for an NGO, is in crisis. Organizational capacity issues, a downturn in international donor support and a lack of government support towards the sector negatively impacts the capacity building and sustainability of many NGOs in South Africa (ibid). Stuart (2013) points to “increased corporatization” and competition for resources amongst stakeholders as additional factors confronting the sector. In total, creating choppy seas for practitioners to navigate.

Exploring the history of civil society in South Africa is needed to understand the present issues within the sector. Habib and Taylor (1999) discussing the transitional periods of NGOs from apartheid to democracy consider the stark challenges, most notably, the lack of support, persecution and embargos faced by non-white organizations from the apartheid regime (ibid:74). Also reviewing the historical underpinnings of the sector, the Coalition on Civil Society Resource Mobilisation (2012:9) furthers that the UN

declaration against apartheid in 1966 and a growing dissent and disapproval from international communities prompted donor bodies from the North to increasingly channel funds directly to local organizations, a strategy quite unique during a time when aid mainly went through governments. Furthermore, the non-white informal civil society was not subject to rigorous follow up and accounting from their donors in order to remain under the nose of the apartheid regime (ibid).

Habib and Taylor (1999:73) mark the 1980s as a key turning point in the sector due impart to the new liberalized policies of the apartheid government and funding surges from international bodies allowing for a proliferation of “antigovernment organizations,” NGOs that fought against the socio-political oppression of the era. They further that after democracy there was a shift in the political focus from liberation to development, forging partnerships with NGOs and the state that had not existed before (ibid:76). The new partnership collaborated within frameworks such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) where NGOs shifted to work prominently in socio-economic development on a national scale (ibid). However the national project was undermined by the new government’s failings, corruption being one of them, resulting in the dismantling of the RDP in 1996 (ibid:78). Subsequently, the government bought into the rhetoric of ‘progress’ housed in development discourse embedding the structural adjustment plans from the World Bank and IMF deeply within its national plan thus shifting their focus to “growth, employment, and redistribution strategy” or what it would come to be known as, GEAR (ibid).

The liberated civil society that once had a hand in drafting the country’s new constitution saw crisis in the reforming sector. Though private donor relationships still existed, with the new climate change from ‘the struggle’ to a liberated South Africa funding dollars returned to main cash flows to and through a neoliberalist government (Habib and Taylor, 1999:79) limiting the type of projects being funded. Further, funding criteria became more sophisticated, moving to project specific funding (ibid) and demanding more professionalism and accountability in line with the present day practices of NGOs (Coalition on Civil Society Resource Mobilisation, 2012:10). NGOs begin to close their

doors due to a “shortfall in organizational capacity” from the new requirements, questions to their relevancy in the new democracy and a large number of skilled personnel moving to state institutions (Habib and Taylor, 1999:79).¹

Within a democratic South Africa emerged new socio-political struggles such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic opening space in the sector for NGOs such as STEPS to be birthed while shifts in development discourse and practice, namely alternative and rights-based approaches to development, allowed for heavy international donor support around the issue. However, it is important to mention at this juncture that South Africa can be viewed as an imperialist force on the continent, using its trust in neoliberalism to foster “aggressive expansion of South African businesses into Africa north of the Limpopo (Miller, 2006; Adebajo, 2007; cited by Nyamnjoh, 2010:69). As such, it has become difficult to call South Africa a developing country in this instance and with themes such as HIV/AIDS on its way out of the development agenda some international donors are setting their sights elsewhere. Competition for resources, primarily funding, and constant agenda shifting from donor NGOs from the North has come to affect overall sustainability within the sector.

As development practice must be contextualized in order to understand how actors navigate within its walls, the historical processes and present day condition of the civil society sector in South Africa becomes vital. It gives key insight into what socio-political factors exist that could shape the type of work, organization and individuals within STEPS, primarily key decision-makers. What specific local structural forces, irrespective of their foreign partnerships, exist? What does civil society have to contend with in the South African context, in other words? Overall, it completes the development landscape as approached in this introduction.

¹ In 1990, 60% of upper management working at NGOs moved to governmental institutions (*Mail & Guardian*, August 22-28, 1997; cited by Habib and Taylor 1999:79)

1.3 Chapter outlines

According to Edelman and Haugerud (2005:1) “development is a matter of life and death,” calling it a “vibrant theoretical field” worth anthropology’s investigative lens. There is much that is known on development and much to know. As such, I am interested in placing an ethnographic lens on the Southern NGO development practitioner and their respective organization. I want to understand how their social environments (life histories) have shaped them specifically and thusly how this has been transferred to the collective identity of the organization they work for that I posit, is a key to unlocking how they navigate the ever in flux development landscape. To understand how they navigate the sector is to go deeply into understanding the very nature of the NGO worker.

This dissertation consists of seven chapters including the *Introduction*. *Chapter 2* discusses *power*, not just represented in obvious relationships of domination and subjectivities but how it in fact is found in everything and everywhere including the supposedly weak Southern NGO practitioner. I further discuss, *navigation* and *habitus* that are the crux of my argument and how these concepts manifest in social microcosms such as development. This conceptual toolkit helps me navigate within my own study in order to address my research aims. *Chapter 3* discusses how I went about examining their day-to-day operations through my own involvement with projects in an attempt to unearth their life histories and *habitus* in order to venture deeper into an exploration of NGO practitioners. This choice to do so, I hoped, would give me greater insights into perceptions of their positionality and ways of being within the development space – how they have come to practice development as they presently do. I also explore my own positionality, looking at reflexivity and ethical concerns that I had to contend with as a dual staff member (insider) and researcher (outsider).

There are three ethnographic chapters in which I attempt to argue my findings and analyses on STEPS as an NGO that is not only subjected to the power of the dominant structures in development but are a producer of power themselves which they utilize in various forms. I further present the ways in which they use subversion and conservative

strategies to navigate the precarities of the sector and their positionality at varying power positions. *Chapter 4* begins my ethnographic exploration where I give a detailed account of the habitus formations and historical processes as related to key decision-makers. This juncture is explored to gain an understanding of what I posit is a key factor in how they frame development discourse and practice and their positionality as such. I stipulate that these decision-makers' habitus informs their agency, thusly being the basis for choices on *how* to navigate the contentious terrain that all NGOs must contend with. *Chapter 5* follows this conjecture by displaying their socialization within the development sector while also maintaining basic dispositions. I also explore fundamental ideologies that structure the ethos and organizational culture of STEPS, this in itself also being informed by past life histories that they have brought into their new field of development from their previous field as media political activists. After gaining an understanding of the individual and the ethos and culture of the organization, *Chapter 6* displays their practices, as it pertains to power dynamics in the field from both positionalities (as dominated and the dominant) and means of navigating within these relational structures in order to maintain their standing as a legitimate NGO. In *Chapter 7*, I conclude the matter.

Chapter 2 – Conceptual discussion on *power, navigation and habitus*

2.0. Abstract

This chapter discusses the key conceptual framework that is a thread running through this dissertation. I substantiate that fundamental to understanding the restricting and contentious relational dynamics in development is to first understand the presence of *power* that pervades these structures at all levels where then a need to negotiate and maneuver within such spaces – *navigation* – becomes pivotal for existence within the development field. In order to understand *how* one navigates these power dynamics I employ the concept of *habitus* that creates a framework in which to analyze this. I am arguing that how people choose to navigate depends on their characters and this is informed by their life processes that have shaped their very being. And in another scope,

by presenting *power* as not only one of the impeding structures in development that Southern NGO practitioners are subject to but also as a tool used by them to achieve or maintain legitimacy, I am presenting these lower positioned stakeholders as not simply individuals waiting to be acted upon but agents in their own destiny able to subvert and conserve dominant discourses as it works to their own agendas.

2.1 Power

Escobar (1995:8) asserts that modernity's dogma has ushered in the age of the "Third World" as a site for needed intervention and theoretical intrigue. This position of power assumed by Western hegemonic forces is a strong testament to the evolutionary process of institutionalized development and its deployment as a top-down centric affair, one that, I have observed, requires the subjected to find ways to navigate and negotiate. Rossi (2004:1) affirms this when she contends that the administration of power is elemental in development thought considering its historical and cultural makings. As such, power becomes intrinsic to my study of STEPS practitioners. To be cognizant of forms of power that are restricting to autonomy is required if one is to find ways of resisting or challenging it (Inglis, 1997). The need for navigation as strategy, stems from systematic power dynamics found in the homogenizing institutions and relational structures within development discourse and practice.

Apt to a study on development as I have approached it is what Cilliers (2013:2-3) calls Foucault's innovative "genius" in how he theorizes power:

Firstly...power is not occasional, but ongoing and ubiquitous...therefore...not applied or acted out from time to time as the need arises, but it is always there, albeit in different forms. Secondly, power...permeates all dimensions of society and life, and forms an all-invasive network of historical relationships from which no subject can escape – subjects are both the agents and products of power. Therefore, in a sense we are never sure who we are. Thirdly, power is intrinsically linked to knowledge.

Foucault's conceptual makings of power, a pervading force that encroaches upon all spheres of civilization, when applied to development, allows the anthropologist to explore various relational and structural themes within the field – from the obvious dominant forces within the hierarchy to the taken-for-granted power that practitioners themselves may exude. Arguably, and as I have found to be the case within the work of STEPS, one can go from 'subjected to' to a 'producer of power' at various moments within the same historical process. Hierarchies themselves allow for this if we consider their formation means there is always a subject below a dominant, the subject than becomes the dominant for another. Though STEPS is subjected to dominant structures in development they themselves are agents of power for those situated beneath them in this lineage. One form of this power is exemplary in their positionality as an intermediary NGO where in this instance, they sit in the power seat from 'above' by providing funding, resources and capacity building to their network of partner organizations in various Southern African countries. They further mobilize power in their cultural capital as filmmakers or experts in the use of media for advocacy that has garnered them symbolic capital from award-winning film productions that have further been shown to have impact in the field by academics and their funders and is a niche in the "marketplace of ideas" (Nyamnjoh, 2013:655) within development.

Foucault's (1980:51) compilation of work details the "constant articulation" of knowledge and truth. He states, "the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power" (ibid:51-52). Knowledge as synonymous with power, in the context of my study, comes from the technical advancement of the West as *superior* to the rest all the way down to the niche skillset of my participants accorded to their positioning in South Africa. Yet knowledge is not synonymous with truth, as Foucault (ibid:132) proclaims:

There is a battle 'for truth', or at least 'around truth'- it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean 'the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted', but rather 'the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true', it being understood also that it's not a matter of a battle 'on behalf' of the truth,

but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays.

The making and reification of ideological frameworks in development reflects these statements. Take for example, the historical processes of the Industrial Revolution that engrained in modern Western society the notions of *progress* as key to unlock the true potential of humankind and societies (Shanin, 1997). To this, Mohanty (1984:335) considers Anouar Abdel-Malek's (1981) thoughts on the modern positioning of the Western hegemonic forces where he considers this "a struggle for 'control over the orientation, regulation and decision of the process of world development on the basis of the advanced sector's monopoly of scientific knowledge and ideal creativity.'" The knowledge of the mechanisms of industrialization created an ideology largely represented in Western thought (Shanin, 1997) and has long since transferred to the theoretical underpinnings of development thought and practice making truth claims within development rhetoric that has created subjects of the Global South countries, Southern NGO practitioners such as STEPS notwithstanding.

The highly criticized economic-heavy development is an easier analysis of power. However, when considering the evolutionary process that gave a human face to the apparatus such as alternative and rights-based approaches, then contemplating Mohanty's (1984:333) exploration into "the production of the 'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject in...(Western) feminist text" can be apt. From her examination of feminist rhetoric in development she found that "Western standards as the benchmark against which to measure the situation of Third World women" resulted in a "paternalistic attitude" and "more generally, the perpetuation of the hegemonic idea of the West's superiority" (cited in Escobar, 1995:8).

These are not stagnant examples but rather have informed project agendas and goals at varying degrees that in essence, have trickled down to Southern NGO workers doing the work on the ground. Furthermore, these ideologies can influence the way development workers from the South perceive women in their region or notions of progress as attuned

to Western thought. In essence, knowledge and the interplay with power can influence and shape perceptions and create truth claims. Unchallenged, they become fact.

Yet, just as the knowledge-power dynamic is formed so too does the “destruction of knowledge” exist within “historical processes” that frame it (Cilliers, 2013:2) resulting in shifts in power. Consider post development’s call for “alternatives *to* development” while others “alternatives *in* development” (Escobar, 1995; Pieterse, 2010; Edelman and Haugerud, 2005). Or for instance, such articulations of change – institutionalized economic heavy development high in fashion in the 1950’s saw its paradigmatic decline with the entrance of human and alternative development (Pieterse, 2010) and rights-based development approaches (VeneKlasen et al., 2004) decades later, shifting power in prominent ideology and agendas as reflected in the large proportion of human rights based focused projects and NGOs being funded over economic-centered forms of development (VeneKlasen et al., 2004). Within my own study, this undoing of knowledge can be seen through STEPS disdain for didactic forms of disseminating knowledge for social change, and in its place, advocating for non-didactic approaches to interventions. They are in essence, destroying frameworks in known practices within development work for what they deem as more effective approaches to engaging communities. The leverage to do so comes from overall shifts in development thought and practice that has allowed for innovative approaches to work on the ground and a variety of stakeholders doing it. And further, in terms of the Western hegemonic control within development NGOs working in the South, the latter are challenging and asserting their agency to right the wrongs within these relational structures (*see* Ashman, 2001; Abugre, 1999; Fowler 1998, 2000 *for some examples*).

2.1.1 Power and civil society

Power has been articulated in development through scholarly voices such as Mosse (2005), Escobar (1995), Mohanty (1984), Rossi (2004) and of course Ferguson’s (1990[1994]) famous work in Lesotho (*as just a few*). Corry (2010:16) in this same vein, theorizes the third sector using Foucault’s (1978) idea on “governmentality,” arguing that

the sector is not free of “power or coercion” but rather power structures act as definitive forces towards an actor’s mobility, position and existence within the space. Using this lens, development then becomes a web of “discourse and techniques or institutions that allows certain practices to flourish and others to appear impossible, wrong, or just ludicrous” (ibid). Not to become a reductionist affair, Corry (2010:17) draws on Gramsci (1971) whose epistemological contribution theorizes the sector “as a zone of contestation...in which social forces vie for dominance: hegemonic blocks sparking their own counter-hegemonic forces and vice versa.” Indeed, this correlates to the potential of power shifts as discussed above by Cilliers (2013) where I argue that though my participants are subjected to the tacit rules of the development sector, they do exert agency in finding ways to circumvent them in order to maintain a level of autonomy and for that matter their sense of personhood and purpose. This is represented in certain members especially who have found ways to maintain strong ties and an active presence in other fields outside of development while still within the parameters of their overall work and vision as a collective.

There is a critique that agency becomes lost in Foucault’s theory. Rossi (2004) notes these gaps when looking at Ferguson’s (1990 [1994]) use of power with his findings in Lesotho. She refers to the criticisms found in Fardon (1985), Giddens (1987:98), and Grillo (1997) that speaks to the overemphasis on “external structures and discourses” lacking deep engagement with the agency of actors (Rossi, 2004:3-4) and points to anthropologies of development that have presented findings supporting, in this case, “‘project beneficiaries’, and marginal groups in general,...[using a]...multiplicity of strategies and forms of negotiation or resistance in order to carry out their own ‘projects in the Project’” (Long, 1989; Arce, Villarreal and de Vries, 1994; Grillo and Stirrat, 1997; Torres, 1997; Arce and Long, 1999; Bierschenk, Chauveau and Olivier de Sardan, 2000; cited by Rossi, 2004:4). I would add Mosse (2005) to this list where he found similar activity with the Bhil cultivators in western India.

She also mentions studies that reflect “the ways in which people ‘at the top’ are able to make a difference to policy events” (Grindle and Thomas, 1991; Haas, 1992; Keeley and

Scoones, 1999; cited by Rossi, 2004:4). Both articulations of agency offer insights into my own findings within my research where I have observed STEPS staff members in similar processes of negotiation and resistance or finding ways to meet their own aims within prescribed project agendas. For instance, their alternative approaches to media advocacy, by passing this form of knowledge on to their partnership networks, can and has influenced and shifted the practices of the partner organization.

Overall, power dynamics within the development space are ever present, and for that matter, always in flux. Though it poses a restrictive and constraining presence when coming from bureaucratically dominant forces towards actors at the bottom, they themselves can exude power in the form of agency in an attempt at levels of autonomy and personhood.

2.2 Navigation

Navigation is a key concept in this thesis. It helps me frame the type of agency I have observed enacted by my participants through articulations of their habitus. As Ashman (2001:94) points out and as I have found in my own pooling of literature, studies in development have engaged heavily with the gapping holes in the aid system around “constraining and contradictory influences of donor policies” and with development as a whole. Within my body of research, however, similar to recommendations made by the author and others such as Lewis et al. (2003) asking for deeper ethnographic insight on the NGO, I am exploring the way in which the practitioners negotiate these structural impediments – how they may anticipate them, divert them, subvert them or allow themselves to be subject to them as its own form of navigation. I will use Vigh’s (2009) engagement with the concept of navigation to illuminate this section. He points to the popularization of the concept in anthropology being used as a trope when discussing practice asserting “it is used when referring to how people act in difficult or uncertain circumstances and in describing how they disentangle themselves from confining structures, plot their escape and move towards better positions” (Vigh, 2009:419). This engagement is apt considering the confining power plays within development that also impacts the sustainability of Southern NGOs (e.g., lack of funding, access to resources,

and shifting agendas resulting in the closure of organizations).

The literal meaning of navigation, Vigh (2009:420) points to, is “to sail” and thus when conceptually employed by anthropology, gives them a lens towards “motion within motion” or in other words, the means by which actors maneuver within changing social circumstances, allowing for “alternative perspective on practice and the intersection between agency, social forces and change.” In the context of development discussed in this dissertation, such *motion* external to the actor would include shifts in development thinking, practice and discourse that they would need to contend with. Navigation for the Southern NGO practitioner would then be how they *navigate* within, say for instance, a funding crisis that arises due to the donor shifting its agenda away from the key themes targeted by the organization.

Considering a social environment that is forever in flux, social navigation thusly requires actors to “‘adapt’ and ‘read’ ‘capricious environments’” (Scott, 1998:331; cited by Vigh, 2009:425). Indeed, the precarity of working in the development sector is quite known by practitioners. As scholars such as Baines et al. (2014) have pointed out actors in civil society have adapted to an environment of permanent insecurity, especially with the shift in the sector towards contract-based employment and project-based funding as opposed to long-term core funding. Also, Vigh (2009:425-26) says that social navigation, because it encompasses the interactivity of both social agents and their environments in the present and future, allows for maneuvering in the “socially immediate and the socially imagined” simultaneously that then “designates the complex of actions and interpretations that enable one to act in the here and now, gain an idea of the possible routes and courses that emerge from the present and direct one’s movement expediently toward possible futures.” For instance, navigation in this way could be seen in how NGOs knowing that funding cycles are limited to 1-3 years on average, are constantly looking for funding or preparing proposals to secure more funding even within current funding cycles – this being if they have the human capital to regularly engage with such activity.

Vigh (2009) points to Bourdieu as being a theorist who attempted to do a similar thing as

navigation using these two poles. Yet, where Vigh (2009:426) says that “navigation reveals itself as an analytical optic that has an edge over its peers” including Bourdieu, I would argue that Bourdieu’s (1977) engagement with the concept of habitus gives deeper insight into the very constructions needed to understand choices in agentic movement. The action taken by one will be different than the action taken by another during social shifts. How one chooses to navigate is of equal importance and this is informed by one’s dispositions and ways of being – habitus, thus making this another area of importance for anthropology’s introspection.

2.3 Habitus

Rossi (2004:6-7) says, “the analytical tools developed by Pierre Bourdieu may be better suited to examine the place of agency and hierarchy in development” because though power and knowledge inform agency “[t]he configuration of external structures is continuously being reshaped by the actors’ strategies, in proportion to their relative power.” My conceptual framework for understanding the *problématique* of the chokehold development can have on actors within the field of development comes from a place least explored – the side of the practitioner. My choice in using Bourdieu’s framing of habitus has fit the framework of my query and what I have seen in the field that gives practitioners a footing to navigate the terrain of development.

Fundamental to Pierre Bourdieu’s *Theory of Practice* (1977) is the concept of habitus. I am utilizing a framework of habitus to explore practitioner’s agency and thusly how they navigate within the volatile development space. Bourdieu (1977:18) says that habitus “acts within...[social beings]...as the organizing principle of their actions, and...this *modus operandi* informing all thought and action (including thought of action) reveals itself only in the *opus operatum*.” Emirbayer and Johnson (2008:4) explains habitus as “relatively durable principles of judgment and practice generated by an actor’s early life experiences and modified (to a greater or a lesser degree) later in life.” These pronounced internal mechanisms forged through the journey of life are a collective of predilections, one’s own idiosyncrasies if you will and are often referred to in Bourdieu’s theories as “a way of being,” “predispositions” that are the agentic figure in the construction of “social

structures and worlds” that being a culmination of formulated and regulated action and practices (Bourdieu, 1977:72-95). He furthers, that particular structures engender habitus (Bourdieu, *ibid*:72). This is line with my argument that my participants have been molded by the specific context of the apartheid and post-apartheid eras in South Africa.

Quite important to my study is the way in which habitus binds an agent’s previous field to their current or emerging one. As explained by Emirbayer and Johnson (2008:4), an actor in a given field is fashioned according to that space, acquiring various capital that they then transfer or carry onward to their new field as guiding principles towards future action. And so when examining the internal mechanisms of STEPS by considering the habitus of its members I am looking at the habitus in which actors entered the space with forged by the “specific past conditions” in the previous field “some of which will be shared with other members and some of which will differ from them substantially” (Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008:4). For STEPS this in particular centers on staff moving from filmmakers outside of the realm of development to practitioners working in media advocacy.

Once in the field, one’s predispositions are then further molded by the present field producing practices either inline with or adverse to that of the current inner-workings of the field. *Doxa* is the “self-evident and undisputed” rules within a given field that are produced and reproduced by the actors within this space (Bourdieu, 1977:164). This “naturalization” produces a “*sense of limits*” also known as the “*sense of reality*” (*ibid*) and become “the taken-for-granted, unquestioned, spontaneous, and commonsensical understandings that prevail across that space” (Emirbayer and Williams, 2005:695). Emirbayer and Williams (*ibid*:693) adds that actors are either trying to break these rules (subversive) or abide by them (conservative) according to their formed and transforming habitus and position within the field. My participants in this way enact both subversion and conservative strategies within their work in the field.

There are various types of habitus formations that can be explored depending on one’s approach and aims in research. Bourdieu generally categorizes them as either a “primary

habitus” or “the system of dispositions that become like second nature to actors as a result either of childhood socialization within the family” or “specific habitus” which happens as an individual matures and are “more specific mechanisms of socialization” (Bourdieu, 2000:164; cited by Emirbayer and Williams, 2005:694). Habitus is the embodiment of both categorical dispositions, the “primary and secondary socializations” concurrently appearing and influencing practice thus making one’s overall habitus “rarely stable and unified” (Bourdieu, 1997:75-80; cited by Neveu, 2007:339). In order to grasp ethnographically, the habitus of my participants I have concentrated on their “specific habitus” as I posit that it relates more prominently to my research aims, understanding that some of their “primary habitus” would be teased out from the interview portion during time in the field.

Using this framework, I have come to understand that one key mechanism that influenced and fashioned my participants’ habitus thus shaping their inclinations towards their career trajectories was the socio-geopolitical struggles of the apartheid-era in Southern Africa. Additional to this, is how these dispositions or the formed habitus according to such field dynamics created within key decision-makers at STEPS a counterculture *pro quo* that they have brought into the development sector that one, aligns them towards alternative development practices and two, directly impacts how they produce and imprint their brand of media advocacy upon the structures, institutions and actors they are regularly in contact with when practicing. Though key decision-makers at STEPS see the world as they do, that of filmmakers, media practitioners and political activists with aversion to the dominant structures of the field, the universality found within the *doxa* surrounding human rights discourses gives them a binding commonality despite their opposing habitus and subversion strategies within it.

2.4 Conclusion

I am reflecting on development not as a sole critique of the apparatus per say but as a means to help me understand the agency of STEPS practitioners by placing them in the historical context in which they find themselves. Examining *power* and its relationship to

knowledge production within historical processes gives the researcher a deep conceptual base to understand how ideas come to be reified within development thought and its articulation in practice. This further gives insight into how the dominating structures can very well exert their power in the form of ideological *assumptions* as prescription on various players in development especially that of the implementing partners in the South. I am exploring the ways in which they can maneuver in such confines and what attributes exist that give aid to this. Exploring *navigation* and *habitus* as conceptual tools helps the researcher to understand ways in which my participants negotiate, maneuver and conform to the dominant relational structures in development while attempting to circumvent others. Overall, my participants are the subjects of power as well as agents exhibiting power.

Chapter 3 – Retrospectives on researching and writing *this* case study

3.0 Abstract

My exploration of actors navigating within a mainstreamed development apparatus centers on observations of power and agency, subversion and conservative strategies and how these have all been influenced by the very nature of the practitioners. This chapter is a retrospection of my methodological approach to examining the STEPS practitioners in this way from an insider-outsider perspective, describing in detail the various inroads and challenges faced from such a vantage point. It sets the scene of my “field site” within the organization’s office in Cape Town and explains my choice in using ethnography to gain access not only to their observable practices but the crux of my analysis – habitus formations. The chapter also displays my own introspection as a researcher to what drew me to frame such a study in the way I have. In conclusion, this chapter aims to display the experience of the researcher as I engaged with actors in observably constrained positions as they attempted to navigate from their very specific way of seeing and being in their social space.

3.1 The need for ethnography to conduct *this* case study

My decision to use ethnography is in order to richly explore the NGO practitioner and their organization in ways that I feel participant observation allows. Arguably, this is a matter of situating the “field” and how to approach “fieldwork” something that Gupta and Ferguson (1997) discuss at lengths I will not be able to fully engage with here. They postulate, that the stark differentiation between anthropology and other disciplines is its methodological approach to the field – participant observation (ibid:2). They note the many emerging critiques on this approach as it pertains to changing landscapes of our world (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Crapanzano, 1980; Dumont, 1978) further using Appadurai (1991:191,196; cited by Gupta and Ferguson, 1997:3) to give it voice:

The landscapes of group identity—the ethnoscapes— around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically self conscious, or culturally homogeneous...The task of ethnography now becomes the unraveling of a conundrum: what is the nature of locality, as a lived experience, in a globalized, deterritorialized world?

Yet, I find anthropology’s ability to intimately engage with its subject as one of the strong suites within its epistemological discussions and methods. I found it necessary to do an ethnography allowing me to get deeply inside the inner-workings of a development organization and even closer still to the development worker considering my already close proximity to the subject matter at the beginning of my research. I understood that the need for intimacy to the unit of study as key to ethnography would be possible for a researcher already working within its ranks. As Gallant (2008:246) stipulates using Tedlock (2000), “firsthand interaction with people in their everyday lives can lead to a better understanding of their beliefs, motivations, and behaviours [sic].”. I find this necessary to understanding habitus.

My study also aims to speak to Lewis et al.’s (2003:545) assertions of the need for more ethnographic exploration of development organizations as opposed to the “‘objects’ of

development, for example peasants, women, or the urban poor” found in studies like Ferguson (1997) and Gardner and Lewis (1996). Further, the shifts in development discourse and practice have given rise to a more diverse array of stakeholders and approaches to programs and practices like that of STEPS and in order to gain insight on these new cast of characters one must go beyond the macro structures that dominate many studies on development in the social sciences to anthropology’s introspective lens. To this, Escobar (1995:105) says that ethnographic analysis of development organizations are key in order to understand their day-to-day practices that can be perceived as “rational or neutral” when “in fact, much of an institution’s effectiveness in producing power relations is the result of practices that are often invisible, precisely because they are seen as rational.” He adds that such an “ethnographic endeavor attempts to explain the production of culture by institutions that are, themselves, the product of a certain culture” (ibid:113).

The organization in my study is just one of many who determine, produce and reproduce the discourses and practices of the contested and complex development field. This sector is not merely GDP growth indicators, charts and reporting, nor is it proposals and project missions, let alone the organization’s vision displayed on plaques in the Director’s office or hallways. Rather, it is a macro and microcosm of social beings interacting within historical sites of time and space. The macro-structures of “alternative” or “mainstream” are just one part of the puzzle, examining the “agency-oriented views” (Pieterse, 2010:12) of practitioners is the other.

3.2 The Research Site – STEPS



The STEPS office in Gardens, Cape Town (Photo credit: Hilke Tiedemann)

The home of STEPS is exactly that, a home. The historic building stands on a corner in the well-known area of Dunkley Square in Gardens, Cape Town. On the same block are a mix of residential homes and boutique marketing and media houses distinguishable only by small signs on the entrances of the businesses. *“If you looked at our office from outside you wouldn’t know that all this is going on,”*² Elaine said on one of the last days of my dedicated time in the field. She and Marianne, my other key informant, busied evaluating their Steps for the Future project using the industry practice of monitoring and

² Interview with Elaine, STEPS office, Cape Town 16th October 2015

evaluation (M&E). She is exactly right. Even when walking in the main hallway on the ground floor you begin to get a glimpse of the history of this organization and its members. When you enter the building after passing the *Steps for the Future* office, a 'Mama Africa' film poster greets you with an exquisite Miriam Makeba standing in a formfitting dress on display. This expose of the life of the celebrated musician and political activist was produced by Day Zero, jointly owned by further key informants Don and Laurence, and was the production company that anchored the foundational *Steps for the Future* HIV/AIDS project before STEPS the NGO existed. The songstress was an ambassador for the project.

The standing promotional banner for *AfriDocs*, the organization's broadcast initiative sits squarely in the wider space where distribution (Jannie's office) is situated. As distribution spaces go, there are shelves of DVDs, pamphlets and sleeves ready to ship out to partner organizations or individuals who have ordered them. Once upstairs besides the kitchen and various offices, four to be exact, a cabinet and wall display prominent awards from prestigious film festivals. A quick look around shows more film posters displayed – one in particular, a poster from *Give Us the Money*, an installment of the *WhyPoverty?* global project, where famous musician Bono daunts the front. Without knowing where you were, you would not immediately understand that you stood in the home of a rights-based development NGO that made "documentary films for social change," as is their mantra on the website.

The conceptual origin of STEPS and the *Steps for the Future* project, as many things go, was birthed in 2001 out of a need. As Levine (2003:58) describes, with the crisis of HIV/AIDS there were "complex social barriers" and a "'strange' silence" that engulfed Southern Africa. Iikka Vehkalahti, a Finnish commissioning editor and Don Edkins, a South African filmmaker would be the co-founders of the *Steps for the Future* project in an attempt to use documentary as an advocacy tool for knowledge dissemination around the pandemic. The project, as a media intervention, became a whirlwind transnational communication campaign bringing together Southern African and international filmmakers, HIV/AIDS activists and organizations, local and international broadcasters,

commissioning editors, donors, and the formation of STEPS – a new non-profit organization that would use film as its vehicle towards social change.

The *Steps for the Future* project, as a media strategy, aimed to target these barriers by producing a catalogue of 36 films in an effort “to address powerful and entrenched attitudes...[like]...denial, stigmatization and discrimination” (Chislett et al., 2003:9) that were prevalent. Levine (2003:59) posits, “films in the STEPS collection...[told]...stories that resonate with people’s lived experiences.” The communication strategies used for the films were clear – tell the stories of people *living* with HIV/AIDS using local stories that audiences could relate to. The larger media intervention included a vast outreach program created to engage communities around HIV/AIDS debates and discussions. Trained facilitators, at times the very subjects of the films themselves, using facilitator’s guides, would moderate audiences after screenings on discussions spawned on by the film’s subject matter and HIV/AIDS related topics. Chislett et al. (ibid:10) determined that these sessions offered an atmosphere for open debate using facts and realism that could speak to misconceptions, prejudice and stigmas that often led to the spread of new infections. The crux of the initiative was to “sensitize” local and international communities to the HIV/AIDS dilemma while disconnecting it from the notion of being a death sentence but rather one of hope and life that needed to be confronted through activism (Chislett et al., ibid: 12).

The outreach along with the non-didactic and local approach to storytelling in the films were considered groundbreaking to the then existing solution-based, often deemed ‘preachy,’ state-sponsored and corporate campaigning on HIV/AIDS awareness (Levine, 2007; Chislett et al., 2003:8-9). The *Steps for the Future* campaign was largely assessed by academics (*see Visual Anthropology Review*, March 2003, Vol. 1 *for literature*) as being highly effective in generating transformative dialogue and experiences for audiences that translated into more informed choices towards HIV prevention.

STEPS have been operational in the development sector in South Africa for 15 years. Presently, they have maintained a similar methodology to the foundational HIV/AIDS

project continuing to use film as a media intervention into other Southern African social dilemmas. My participant, Theresa, had this to say about the growth of *Steps for the Future*: “I’m constantly amazed by the SFTF project cause I don’t think anyone thought it was going to live more than a couple of years. They just kept building on the connection and the collection.”³ The organization has gone on to use their methodology to address injustices largely to do with stigma and discrimination related to sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR), sexual gender based violence (SGBV), LGBTI, youth issues, poverty, democracy, eye care, and environment – themes present in many rights-based advocacy initiatives.

3.2.1 Staff

STEPS is a predominantly African organization demographically and by way of birth. Laurence, the present acting Director and board member and Don, as discussed above and also on the board are both white South Africans in their early 60s. Janni is a South African Afrikaans male in his early 50s and is our Distribution Manager. Theresa (General Manager) and Ingrid (Accounts Assistant) are Coloured⁴ South African women in their early 40s. Elaine (Head of Regional Training) is an early 40s black Zambian woman and Elie (Head of Accounting), in his mid 40s, is a black Burundian man. Then there is Pochia (Maintenance and Chef) who is an early 40s black South African (Xhosa) woman. Marianne, the in-house advisor to STEPS, head of the *Steps for the Future* project and Don’s wife, is the exception as a white German woman in her 60s. And finally, the researcher, I am a black/mixed-race Jamaican female in my late 30s who grew up in the U.S.

I have designated three individuals whose biographies I will discuss in depth in the proceeding chapters – Don, Marianne and Laurence – as I feel they have contributed largely to setting the tone for the foundations of the organization. This is not to omit or not put on display other contributors such as present staff or previous influencers,

³ Interview with Theresa, STEPS office, Cape Town, 1st October 2015

⁴ “Coloured” is a racial designation stemming from the apartheid racial classification that loosely refers to South Africans of mixed-raced heritage.

however, they are outside of my scope of ethnographic capabilities and interest when approaching my core research aims to examine the main players within STEPS who substantially influence the movement of the organization.

3.3 Positionality of the researcher

I have worked with STEPS since June 2014, most others since the inception of the organization in the early 2000s. I joined STEPS out of sheer circumstance; as a self-funded postgrad student I needed a job. My relationship with the subjects more than the subject matter itself was quite intimate at the time of entering the field considering I had never worked at an NGO prior to STEPS. My previous career background was in media, the high gloss of the U.S. entertainment industry to be exact, but that sector created a desire for a career that was more “meaningful.” In this way I can relate to my informants, as some worked in commercial film production before starting with STEPS, and prefer the nature of this type of work with a perceived level of social purpose. Other participants have always maintained the use of film as a tool to speak to social injustices. As a result, I felt I found a career home within STEPS.

My positionality leads to questions of objectivity where reflexivity is at its core. As Kempny (2012:50) writes, “[r]eflexivity refers to the problem of accounting for the role of anthropologists as participants in the cultures or societies, which they study. Beyond the question of the personal biases that may affect research, anthropologists need reflexive awareness of their impact on the objects of study and of how their identities may affect the process of knowledge production.” My dual role as staff member (being part of the culture) and researcher (examining the culture) demands this acute awareness. However, in any ethnography the construction of knowledge is “always partial” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; cited by Kempny, 2012:39) which means whether one is a complete novice to the field in question or an insider-outsider such as myself, issues with reflexivity are a natural occurrence in ethnography and as such “reflexivity has become a core element of ethnographic fieldwork” (Marcus and Fischer, 1986; cited by Kempny, 2012:39).

As an insider, I work largely on the *AfriDocs* initiative which is new and largely unattached from the core work of STEPS – that being, producing films and training facilitators in various Southern African communities – creating a level of outsider positioning when engaging with my informants that I seldom work with. Strathern (1987:18; cited by Kempny, 2012:42) speaks to this: “‘being a member of the overarching culture or society in question does not mean that the anthropologist will adopt appropriate cultural genres.’” Hertz (1997:viii; cited by Kempny, 2012:41) says: “‘Reflexivity in ethnography involves an ongoing process which constantly returns to the questions ‘What do I know?’ and ‘How do I know it?’ in order to maintain continual questioning as to where the information has been created.’” Considering this, I must reiterate how much of a novice I truly am.

My understanding of development originally stemmed from my academic readings. When I started the program (MPhil in Development Studies) at UCT, my Anthropology of Development course proved most beneficial in feeding my new academic journey. I was fascinated by the history, theories and critiques (especially within post-development) on an industry that the average person from “the West” saw as profoundly good, needed and unquestionable. I would never look at another aid or call-to-action campaign the same again. I knew I wanted to engage with development for my thesis using anthropology’s epistemological methods but how and from what approach? When contemplating several junctures for my thesis months later my interest in researching STEPS, in particular, stemmed not from my position at the organization working on their *AfriDocs* broadcast initiative, but from discovering the findings from a journal (*Visual Anthropology Review*, March 2003, Vol. 1) that dedicated essays on analyses of *Steps for the Future*. It helped me understand STEPS as critical actors in media advocacy and the overall development sector in South Africa, and worth revisiting as key players in this sphere of research. The question then became, what about STEPS should I explore that others have not up until that point. This question took me in many directions beyond my initially proposed research question.

Gupta and Ferguson (1997:32) question:

‘In what sense might we think of one’s ‘background’—growing up, as it were, in ‘the field’—as a kind of extended participant observation? In posing such questions, we do not mean to deny the evident differences between the two kinds of experience; we intend only to ask what the consequences are of treating such differences as both absolute and absolutely definitive of anthropology’s disciplinary identity.

I have indeed become a part of the culture. As a result, the field site was a very comfortable space for me to explore ethnographically. My main issue in the beginning was finding a thesis topic that was ethically sound and apt for ethnographic exploration. It became clearer and clearer to me that looking at STEPS as an entire organization was the way to go. And as questioned by the above critical writers in the academy, does my experience not constitute the rich data that is the eventual product of all true ethnographies? Overall, I hold that my insider-outsider positionality in this research allowed me to accomplish my research aims that sought to thickly describe the nature of my participants as the building blocks in their practices.

3.4 Participant observation

Participant observation is critical as a form of ethnographic method because it allows for the intimacy needed in gathering key data in order to undertake a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the researcher’s unit of analysis. As Nyamnjoh (2013:654) points out, “[b]eing an insider or an outsider is always work in progress, is permanently subject to renegotiation and is best understood as relational and situational.” Being an employee of STEPS means I was already immersed as a participant observer, to some degree, and in essence the task of acquiring the “insider’s view” (Spradley, 1980:4; cited by Butvilas and Zygmantas, 2011:37) was made possible. However, this required that I regularly assessed my work in the field to ensure not only an unbiased account but that I had not taken anything for granted during my exploration.

My time in the field was structured in order for me to observe STEPS in their day-to-day practices in order to determine how they operated from an organizational culture level within their work. One form of observing culture, as posited by Geertz (1973) is to examine behavior and its inference in relation to context. In order to delve into this sphere of research – STEPS’ culture (ethos and vision as informed by habitus) and its articulation into practices (agency) – I had to study the actors who comprise the organization and account for daily observable phenomena. My fieldwork spanned four months and consisted of deep hanging out with the staff members from the *Steps for the Future*, *AfriDocs* and *CareTakers* projects along with support staff in distribution and accounting during their work hours. Beyond deep hanging out to gain observable phenomena, I participated in projects by way of joining meetings and discussions on strategy or monitoring and evaluations of outcomes from ongoing or past initiatives. My observation of their work has offered deep insights into their practices and their ways of being. I also attended local facilitated screenings in order to get a general sense of my participants in varying spaces and engagements as well as traveled with *AfriDocs* to attend a film festival as part of my normal project member duties.

This was the first layer of being a participant observer. Additional layers included observing and engaging with the lunchtime chatter that happened daily around a communal meal. I observed and joined in on the discussions that ranged from the superficial to the personal to world affairs. Rarely would work matters come up and never would the television be put on or cellphones tolerated. There were moments of silence, laughter and banter on all levels ranging from the inappropriate to the sensitive depending on who was at the receiving end. The lunch table brought key insight into who my participants were. The kitchen was another place of introspection. It was small but constantly frequented by staff and also housed similar discussions on anything from the lunch menu to plans for the weekend. I was also able to observe the movement of staff daily – who came in when and with what type of energy, who chatted with who most frequently, even the seating at the table that remained the same generally unless a visitor disrupted the flow. Staff meetings were another layer of introspection that allowed me to see their personality traits in another arena. The lunch table became a meeting room that

allowed for an interesting blending of work and play. Emails, phone calls, Skype calls, in-house meetings with filmmakers and others, board meetings that I was not privy to but also happened at the lunch table, running up the stairs and down the stairs to fax, copy, print, get advice on tech issues with one's laptop or just to talk causally were all activities in the day-to-day affairs of STEPS staff members. As I observed and participated, I began to understand the ways of being of my participants.

3.5 Interviews

Beyond participant observation I needed to understand their histories and ideologies by corresponding with my participants on two-levels: natural conversations and interviews. Gallant (2008:249) citing Fontana and Frey (2000) asserts, "interviewing is one of the most powerful ways to understand others and that unstructured interviewing can result in a wider breadth of data." I conducted face-to-face, telephonic and Skype interviews using semi-structured, open-ended questions with staff members at STEPS and key individuals from their network of partner organizations in Lesotho, Botswana and Cape Town along with a filmmaker in Berlin. The locations for face-to-face interviews were mainly in the office with one happening offsite with an individual from a partner organization.

When interviewing STEPS staff largely conversations were had during work hours and in work settings allowing interviews to feel undisruptive to normal work functions decreasing the power dynamics and maintaining a level of comfort between the researcher and informant. Interview structures were never too formal and flowed within the schedules of my participants. "Do you have time today?" "No, but Friday for an hour..." These pseudo-scheduled interviews were just one layer of interviewing while others happened during deep hanging out sessions and were quite impromptu.

I conducted individual interviews over a four-month period, the span of my time in the field. They ran from 45-90 minutes depending on how many sessions I required with the participant. The questions ranged from socio-political, to biographical and work specific. They were encouraged to speak frankly about each area and I sensed that their familiarity

with me allowed them to do so. My relationship to the subjects allowed for open discussions about things from funding to the way they viewed each other and even their futures working in development. Considering at the time, my literature review largely encompassed media advocacy in the African context and civil societies role in democracy, questions were framed to gain knowledge in this way as well. I wanted to explore how my participants understood social issues and what informed this framing. I wanted to understand how they saw the field, so asking questions on their opinions of the type of people who would do advocacy work and STEPS' overall position within the context of civil society in the new South Africa helped bring insight.

Questions such as, “does funding affect practices?” and “what are some of the biggest challenges in this line of work?” helped me tease out the issues with development from their point of view. I also wanted to understand why they chose to work in media advocacy as opposed to another form of profession. “Why not banking?” I asked. Additional queries centered on their life histories (birthplace, social class, religion if any, etc.). It was through these inquiries that I was able to understand how their life histories, ideologies and present anxieties could frame a research question that ethnography could solve.

3.6 Data collection and analysis

My aim was to structure my research in hour blocks daily to separate my insider-outsider conundrum. I would work on my *AfriDocs* duties usually in the first part of the day and then excuse myself to do deep hanging out with *Steps for the Future* or with Laurence in *CareTakers* to conduct interviews. With Don and Theresa and other supporting staff I did a series of interviews while observing their work as we worked. My design of hour blocks became quickly consumed by me taking on the researcher function at all times in the day. As I sat at work, working, a deep introspective thought would come and I would go directly to my Google Drive (where I dictated my notes in these instances) in order to write them down. When away from my desk I carried my notebook constantly and if not available to me I dictated in my phone. I clocked in at 9am as a staff member *and*

researcher and left at the end of my workday having collected key data and also dually completing my work for *AfriDocs*.

Gallant (2008:250) posits, “[i]n any research that depends on people describing their thoughts and experiences, it is important to recognize that the stories told will change with each telling. Present circumstances change our views of the past and the way we choose to describe the past to the current audience.” And though this is true, coupling interview data with participant observation and field specific literature, as I did, can help mitigate for any fallible first-hand account of data. But at most, this too must be accepted as the potential of any type of study done in the social sciences when data is collected from a subjective account.

I also reviewed pertinent literature to use for document analysis including but not limited to facilitator’s guides, facilitator self-evaluation forms, audience response reports, impact assessment reports, a small percentage of donor required reports, research papers and any internal electronic communications that were accessible and deemed vital to my research. Additional to this, I watched various films being used in the interventions that were ongoing during my time in the field. Transcription of my interviews and journal was done throughout my time in the field and in my analysis and written findings for this dissertation I have referred back to segments from my interviews in quoted form. I stored my collected data on my laptop with a back up folder on an external hard drive while subsequently using Google Drive as a third dimension of storage and security.

As Gallant (2008:251) found in exploring power and emancipation of Arab women, “[b]y analyzing the stories that the participants chose to share and the way they chose to tell them, an understanding of the underlying social discourses emerges.” My time in the field was quite inductive in this way. My approach shifted with layers upon layers of data that came from my observations and interviews. The upside of ethnography is that it allows for this. Zaharlick (1992 cited by Suryani, 2008:124) “describes this feature as an *interactive-reactive approach*” where an “ethnographer can make modification to the research questions, design and technique from the beginning until the completion of the

study.” The key concepts I now use only emerged later into my introspection from the stories and the observation of practices and demeanors of my participants.

For instance, funding was never discussed in too much depth as it seemed like a touchy subject in general, which was another way I was able to tease out the power hold the donor has over organizations. Such discursive practices like this guided me. Furthermore, I was able to detect their level of distaste for mainstream development discourse and practice by sayings like ‘UN-bullshit educational videos’” that I not only read in their STEPS by STEPS book (Edkins and Vehkalahti, 2008:8) used in my document analysis but also continuously heard variations of during interviews and further shown in their actions. This opened my eyes to their ethos and I saw how despite their socialization within development they maintained a large part of their previous, what I would come to understand as, *habitus*.

Gallant (2008:249) names the “three voices” in research that we must account for – “the researcher...the participants and...academic literature.” As such, the transcribed interviews have been weaved throughout my thesis body along with observations from myself within the field analyzed from a self-reflexive stance. This was further supported by the depth of literature on development discourse and practice as well as any historical processes that helped contextualize my findings or the parameters of the work of my participants. Overall, my aim was to thematically analyze my plethora of data and present a well-informed thesis on STEPS that in accordance with this goal, I feel I have accomplished.

3.7 Retrospectives on ethics

The most prominent ethical concern for my study is my professional involvement with the organization I am studying and its potential to engender bias. I understand that as a social scientist my aim and ethos is to conduct objective, unbiased research and to mitigate for anything that can compromise this. And though this is so, the very art of ethnography (participant observation, building rapport, semi-structured interviews)

breaks down many barriers one would consider needed to stay stringently objective. I have already discussed reflexivity and as it is always a matter to contend with, anthropologists have been able to successfully use these methods to conduct ethical studies important to societies and academia. And as a student researcher this was my highest and most respected priority when using such techniques in my own study. Additionally, one can argue that my position within the company allowed me the best position to conduct an ethnography. I built quite a relationship with my participants, establishing a rapport that allowed for great progression towards the information I used for my data collection.

England (1994; cited by Gallant, 2008:248) “has noted that the researcher must acknowledge and make transparent the power relationship between the researcher and the researched.” And as is the case, STEPS could be considered as having power or influence over me as the researcher. To acknowledge this potential is one thing but I would like to assert that from the vantage point of my participants, the STEPS organization were very verbal in their desire for an honest observation of their inner-workings, viewing this as beneficial to their work. As seen detailed in this chapter, STEPS is a research savvy company and a precedence already exist for participating in assessment and impact reports for donors and the academy. As a result, there was a high level of transparency during my observations. Though I picked up on hesitations with funding questions, what was shared with me plus in depth literature on the matter allowed for a strong framing of this relational structure within development practice. Further, they gladly welcomed my thesis focus and at no time coerced my approach to this subject matter or presented any agenda they would want me to include, or points to exclude. And it must be stated that I do not feel my job security has been compromised by my findings from the study.

Kempny (2012:41) using (Harding, 1991:109) asks the question: “Must the researcher be disinterested, dispassionate and socially invisible to the subject?” And in my case as an insider-outsider when considering this, how do I negotiate my positionality when in fact, I am quite visible and for that matter passionate about the subject matter? I do understand the notion of being *seduced* by the mission especially considering the previous positions

from other academics on the work of STEPS. However, the literature largely featured their HIV/AIDS media advocacy campaign leaving room for a fresh outlook and critique when exploring the organization. In this regard, again reflexivity became a backbone to my time in the field and analysis of data. Because of the depth of knowledge on development and the frankness of my participants I felt quite comfortable in reporting my analysis as I have without any hesitation or reluctance to expose certain findings. My aim was to explore a fresh approach to discussing development but not reinvent the wheel in the process, a task I feel I have accomplished.

Overall, I abided by the ethics guidelines of Anthropology Southern Africa's (2005) detailed document. I feel I enacted a level of dignifying and respectful engagement with my research participants. Further, I did due diligence in getting informed consent from participants – written consent for face-to-face interviews and recorded verbal consent for telephonic or Skype interviews once approval to record was given. Prior to commencing any interview, I fully disclosed my research and its aims (even if previously done so). I also informed them of their rights as a participant, including the right of refusal to answer any question and their right to be an anonymous respondent. Lastly they were also informed of their right to be excluded from the study at any juncture.

There are often stark moments that mark a researcher's exit strategy from the field. My insider-outsider position posed an issue in this regard, however I mitigated this by a carefully constructed plan and timeline in the field. Once officially leaving the field in late October, I conducted no further interviews or field reports to include in my data analysis. Since this time, I have also returned to the U.S. for holiday and to commence my thesis writing and upon my return to South Africa have returned to my normal schedule and activity on the *AfriDocs* project. Overall, I do not feel that there is any conflict of interest that would deem my research unethical or problematic.

3.8 Conclusion

As Gallant (2008:244) states “...emancipation can be advanced through understanding and challenging social discourses that support restrictive power relations. In order to advance this premise, the collection of in-depth data is necessary” which I myself have employed to conduct my own study on power and emancipation. I decided to conduct an ethnography in order to thickly describe STEPS – the observable yet sometimes hidden particularities found within their work. As Gallant (ibid:252) posits “an ethnographic case study approach is a very effective tool for identifying dominant socio-cultural discourses.” By utilizing methods found in ethnographic exploration such as participant observation and document and literature analysis, I was able to frame concepts such as power, navigation and habitus. By analyzing my findings, in the corresponding chapters I aim to give qualitative evidence as to why STEPS operates as it does and how in so doing, they are able to navigate the precarious forces of an industry that in itself is constantly in flux.

Chap 4 – Becoming STEPS: habitus formations of key decision-makers

4.0 Abstract

My aim in this chapter is to explore the habitus formation of key individuals that I argue made the construction of STEPS possible. For many of the decision-makers at STEPS the apartheid and post-apartheid South African era was a key factor in shaping their habitus prior to entering the development field. I posit this way of being to consist of a counter-culture identity birthed from political activism during the era. This exploration aptly looks at the stages of identity creation and ideological transformations, as you will, from passive to active citizens. It is in the micro details of the experiences of my participants that lay the answers to how this organization has been constituted. To begin telling the story of STEPS I must first tell the story of these individuals, whose experiences, relationships and social networks were vital in the advent of the organization and its present existence. In the below section I will explore the previous life histories of present

key decision-makers as traveling documentarians, political activists and media pedagogists during these shifting eras. I argue that these past experiences attribute to the formulating of their use of alternative approaches to media interventions, that of non-didactic local storytelling and facilitated outreach methodologies.

4.1 Biographical insights on the historical makings of key decision-makers – the pre-STEPS era

4.1.1 Don

Don is an Anglo-South African in his early 60s born in Cape Town but raised in Port Elizabeth. He grew up in a household he deemed to be liberal and middleclass with scholarly parents who, though they were not active in the anti-apartheid struggle, he asserts, “had an enquiring mind and could also see injustice.”⁵ Despite their pacifist nature, they instilled a sensibility within their son that would be further nurtured by life experiences. While nothing radical happened in his immediate surroundings his parents and some associations at school began to shape his mindset on the socio-political happenings around him. Through a series of interviews with Don at the STEPS office in Cape Town, I began to understand how this mindset took further shape from his teens into adulthood, allowing me to move towards gaining depth into his specific habitus.

When you look around Don’s office you sense the busyness of a man well traveled. His desk is cluttered with DVDs of some filmmaker’s recent work to be considered for licensing on *AfriDocs*, pamphlets and booklets from recently attended film festivals, usually of the European kind, and receipts to be sorted and given to accounts for bookkeeping. In my year and a half as a staff member with the organization and my few months as a researcher, I have yet to see his office cleared of the work clutter. This same office is often without an occupant with Don gone on lengthy trips to Europe usually dominated by his work at film festival workshops and on pitch committees or on the hunt for funding or maintaining relationships with donors, separately, or sometimes jointly.

⁵ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

The two worlds converge often. During one of my interview sessions where I was able to sit with Don he shared with me some key turning points that set him on this path towards media advocacy:

Definitely one thing that helped me was when I got a scholarship to go to the States and that brought me into a completely different environment where...you could actually read all these things that were banned in South Africa. ...it was the height of the anti-Vietnam war protest, their conversations were quite global, progressive, almost radical...and that was a kind of a big experience for me. ...And I was 17, so still young...⁶

The concept of counterculture emerged when he shared his insights on the notion of “hippy”:

Hippy is just one side of the counterculture. The counterculture was really to try and find an alternative global viewpoint and an alternative culture to the culture that was there...I was very interested in that, and I was reading a lot about that. Um, how to create a counterculture, how to create something different. How to question things, and you know, to look at culture from a different point of view or to look at society through culture.⁷

It was an opportune time for Don to be in the U.S. as a white South African male unaware of just how to articulate his growing curiosity to social injustices. The decade of the 1960s and early 1970s was highlighted with white liberal political and social activists highly entrenched in social movements from the anti-war cry to women’s movements in an attempt to promote “equality”, “peace” and “love”, something seldom seen at such scale and openness in a suppressed South Africa. The notion of counterculture was well-established during these periods and involved art and literary work as a form of activism articulation (Roszak, 1995; Gitlin, 1993). As Don experienced various levels of social awakening, development also encountered shifts. The 1960s brought a change in human rights discourse and a surge of human rights NGOs that focused on global socio-political

⁶ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

⁷ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

injustices (Nelson and Dorsey, 2008:13). The 1970s saw the birth of “alternative development manifestos” and its claims towards implementing “another development,” from the below as opposed to state and market interventions (Pieterse, 2010:94). Yet, the human rights discourse was largely out of the development picture, except for certain debates held by the United Nations, causing a conceptual divide between agencies dealing in human rights and those in development (Nelson and Dorsey, 2008:13-14) which would later change. “Trends and forces” such as the crisis of development in the 1990s, mirrored by the rise of post-development critiques and changing conditions in human rights NGOs incentivized development discourse and practice to begin to merge with that of human rights allowing for rights-based approaches in development (Nelson and Dorsey, 2008:14). This genealogy helps frame the shifts in power within a development field Don and others would soon enter using their alternative practices and ethos.

Don’s short stint in the U.S. continued the construction of sensibilities that were being shaped by his circle of influence in South Africa, but introduced a way to document and express anti-establishment and counterculture ideology through art. For Don, at the time, this was photography. The conception of countercultures including how to formulaically create articulations of one would lend to a foundational ideology that STEPS’ ethos would come to embody. Don took what he learned and returned to South Africa with new insight and understanding of how to use his camera as a means to document social injustice. Rather than going to the tertiary level, Don went on to exist within the counterculture in South Africa as a white hippy using art to fight apartheid.

4.1.2 Marianne...and Don

Don met Marianne, his wife, at a hippy commune in South Africa. This relationship would foster key components to the foundation of STEPS. Marianne’s journey also coincides with the counterculture and anti-establishment political youth movements. As a white German woman, presently in her early 60s, she went to South Africa with a burning need to join the anti-apartheid fight. To her, “*Germany was too safe, too*

secure.”⁸ She shared with me through a series of interviews and deep hanging out sessions that her experiences largely mirrored Don’s through their partnership - a teamwork of traveling media activists. Her primary habitus was one shaped by being a middleclass “*liberal*” pastor’s daughter who taught her the moralistic Christian tenets of charity and goodwill to others. “*I’m not a church goer but I have a set of pretty high moral norms through my church upbringing*”⁹ she told me during one of our sessions.

Marianne’s habitus has been largely associated with the development narrative. Pieterse (2010:26-27) explains “developmentalism is...a secularized version of the Christian perspective...[and]...arose from a rejection of religious explanations and clerical claims while following parallel cognitive tracks.” Progress, the backbone of the development narrative largely comes from this enlightened version of religious thought Pieterse (ibid) asserts. For Marianne, being reared in such a household created the foundation for shaping a habitus that would be the building blocks for her entry into the development field but first took her on a journey towards activism in other parts of the world. She and Don traveled for many years doing a variety of activities, like their time in Guatemala helping to rebuild communities after a major earthquake and living in the U.S. in one of the many spiritual communes that came out of the countercultural movements of the 1970s (Kent, 2001). Don, during this time, used his skill in photography to document socio-political happenings in the areas where they lived. As he put it, “*political, social, economic was always the focus.*”¹⁰ In this way, like Marianne, he continued developing a habitus fitting for formally entering the field of the development sector.

...So under apartheid, for me it was photography, and then when I started learning about documentary film, it was about documentary film because of the story that you got in there and because it could touch people emotionally and intellectually so powerfully. Books do as well, photography does as well but I think film, documentary film, is the most

⁸ Interview with Marianne, STEPS office, Cape Town, 22nd September 2015

⁹ Interview with Marianne, STEPS office, Cape Town, 22nd September 2015

¹⁰ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

*powerful of all those mediums because it tells the story in image and sound and you can reach many people through that.*¹¹

Marianne and Don traveled throughout the Americas and Lesotho before settling in Germany for a time with their two boys, one born in the U.S. and the other in Lesotho. While there Don was introduced to a German collective of documentary filmmakers introduced to him by Marianne. She also received a Masters in Media Education, a skillset she would later use in her work with non-profit constructions and methodology formulations. His first films through the collective were on migrant labor in Lesotho. Don would later use video projectors, a new technological advancement at the time, to show the films in the villages. Don, on the result of this new project, observed:

*...it caused an incredible amount of discussion in the villages because it was their own stories and such an integral part of their life. And issues that they were dealing with, it had such a huge impact that I could see this was like a really important part of how to use the films.*¹²

An alternative development methodology was birthed that STEPS would embody, as Don confirmed during one of our discussions, *“everything can be based back to our experiences in Lesotho...bringing it back to Lesotho and screening it in the villages showed me how important it was, that communication that film could bring about.”*¹³ Marianne and Don would carry on to launch a mobile cinema unit traveling to rural communities in Lesotho, and years later construct the non-profit Sesotho Media. The couple would eventually move to Cape Town and STEPS would launch some time later incorporating the approach and methodology constructed in Lesotho.

¹¹ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

¹² Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

¹³ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

4.1.3 Laurence

Laurence, the present Director of STEPS, was also with the organization from the very beginning. He is a Jewish South African from Johannesburg in his early 60s with a long and involved history in the anti-apartheid movement through the use of media. Laurence came from a middleclass family who he deems were “*liberal humanist.*”¹⁴ His parents owned a medium-level hardware business that kept them away from home often. He shared with me that as a child he was quite sensitive and aware of the atrocities happening around him, something I posit, is a display of his primary habitus. From his accounts, witnessing the abuse at the hands of the apartheid police towards his “*surrogate mother*”, the domestic worker taking care of the affairs of the household, played a major role in the formation of his political activist mind frame.¹⁵ As he accounts:

*... I was very...traumatized even in my neighborhood seeing how the police were towards black people and the domestic workers and if their husbands were staying on, they would do pass raids in the middle of the night and come raid the properties. And the discussions within the family and even from within the Jewish community...all of the white folks involved, they were all Jewish communist. So I had a lot of exposure to that whole strand of intellectual kind of people involved...and I think I was quite a sensitive young boy and I use to freak out when I saw what was happening.*¹⁶

Influenced by his surroundings, Laurence would find himself involved in the anti-apartheid movements as a youth opting out of formal employment and tertiary schooling. Unlike Don, Laurence was not sold on media as a form of activism but was introduced to the mode through his social networks that had access to the equipment. He and a few others began shooting what they saw happening on the streets of Johannesburg and soon realized the power of getting these rogue films to international media:

¹⁴ Interview with Laurence, STEPS office, Cape Town, 10th September 2015

¹⁵ Interview with Laurence, STEPS office, Cape Town, 10th September 2015

¹⁶ Interview with Laurence, STEPS office, Cape Town, 10th September 2015

When I was growing up and this whole period, there was a lot of convergence between being sort of counter-cultural hippy and very political. If I were in the States I would've been a straight hippie but here I had to be political and a hippie. ...I got into film as a means for being a political activist. I didn't get into film because I was absolutely sold and found film was my calling in life. I could've been anything else.¹⁷

Laurence's use of "had to" stands out to me in his statement as firmly expressing his habitus as a political activist. Instead of being complacent as many white South Africans leaned towards during apartheid (Steyn, 2005), he felt a strong need to be involved in the struggle, such a way of being as molded by the structural forces even within his own home. Also, media's ability as a collective and a tool used as a "watchdog" (Tettey, 2001; Berger, 2002:36; Olukoyun, 2004:12; Zaffiro, 1993:7) is represented in Laurence's utilization of the medium to do covert missions during the era in order to get news footage to the international community on what was happening in South Africa. As he shared with me:

[we]...managed to sort of situate ourselves as a service facility to the foreign media. The foreign media had its own bit of protection so we called ourselves Video News Services (VNS) and that was our cover basically. But the meantime we are rushing around under the guise of being working with the foreign media but we were actually working with the ANC. And we did that for 10, 12 years and we developed the biggest archive of that period which now sits at...Robben Island...¹⁸

Laurence's past experience as a political activist can also speak to navigation, which is as dependent on habitus as it is on positionality. Vigh (2009:430) discusses navigation as a "modality of movement...related to one's social position and experience of control over social forces." In line with this, Nyamnjoh (2013:655) says "[w]ho gets to move, or whose mobility is privileged, shall determine whose version of what encounter is documented, how it is documented, and the extent of its visibility in the marketplace of

¹⁷Interview with Laurence, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

¹⁸Interview with Laurence, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

ideas.” Laurence’s “whiteness” or race (Steyn, 2005; Nyamnjoh, 2010) comes into the discussion here, as does Marianne’s and Don’s. The privilege afforded to them by their position within the apartheid social structure gave them access to capital that helped in the anti-government movements. As Steyn (2005:122) points to within the new trends of “whiteness studies” scholars are examining “a resistant, rearticulated whiteness...[that]...can be a socially useful identity, building antiracist alliances with people of all groupings who seek to further the cause of social justice and democracy,” which I see expressed though the early political work of the three STEPS decision-makers.

Historically, media has always engaged with forms of social transformation (Olukoyun, 2004:73) that encompasses media advocacy – the “strategic use of the mass media as a resource to advance a social or public policy” (Pertschuk, 1989:8; cited by Jernigan and Wright, 1996:306). Mosime and Mhlanga (2016:56-57) explain that in times of colonialism media served the interest of the colonial powers. Likewise, in South Africa prior to the 1990s most of media was state-owned and run (Wanyeki, 2000:25). The South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) was established in the 1930s and engaged with a longstanding propaganda agenda that maintained the status quo of the apartheid vision (Berger 2002:36). However, since the onset of postcolonial democratic transitioning in governance (the emergence of political pluralism) and media development on the continent (privatization), media have been charged with a two-fold mission – a ‘watchdog’ function for pro-democracy movements (Tettey, 2001; Berger, 2002:36; Olukoyun, 2004:12; Zaffiro, 1993:7) and how to confront the many divides that exist in their societies. For instance, “the invention of homogeneous national identities – what is commonly known as the African national project” (Mosime and Mhlanga, 2016:57-58). One way to do this can be found in Berger’s (2002:36) assertion that key to democratic transformation of societies in southern Africa, for instance, are for media to not only actively support things like constitutional reform but to do so by also forming alliances with other members of civil society, engaging with the “information-poor”, and bridging the divide between private and political spheres. I consider my participants as indicative in this process.

With the entrance of democracy in post-apartheid South Africa Laurence's activist days would wean off for many years. The organization eventually dismantled during this time and Laurence essentially left filmmaking and activism to tend to a farm he had possession of but realized it was not financially sustainable and so had to return back to filmmaking. In doing so, he knew it could only be centered on social issues, something, he states, had become "*natural*" for him. Laurence would later meet Don through AfraVision, a video catalogue that housed the archival and stock footage of the VNS days, when Don contacted them for equipment and assistance with the Lesotho films. The two would later form Day Zero productions:

...I had been speaking to people within the ANC and they were going to start this whole thing of land reform and I had proposed to them that we do a documentary around land reform...and because I had gotten to know Don a way back I had told him about this film and I brought him on to the production and we set up Day Zero to do the production.¹⁹

After Laurence and Don produced the land reform film, Laurence went back to farming and Don carried on using the production company for his own projects. When the *Steps for the Future* project was spearheaded Laurence joined the production 6-7 months into its start to produce many of the films in the catalogue, all work being done under Day Zero before STEPS, the NGO was formally created. It was also through Laurence that Don met Iikka Vehklahti, the commissioning editor from Finland who sometime after meeting the two men, would become the founding father of the *Steps for the Future* project.

4.2 Conclusion

"Habitus is the background of and resource for playing the social game...[an]...interior to history, yet as a general environment for practice, pervades or saturates social

¹⁹ Interview with Laurence, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

processes” (Foster, 1986:105). The political field of South Africa fashioned the dispositions and choices of my participants. I argue that Don and Marianne’s histories along with key decision-makers like Laurence shaped the overall ethos and informed the practices of the organization, one that mirrored the changing tides of the development shifts at the time to present. The early political work of STEPS decision-makers allowed them to see what was possible when using media in an alternative way. They were a part of the white minority who used their various capitals – social, cultural, economic and symbolic – to gain access to the tools to be a counter voice to apartheid right under the nose of the State. In the following chapter I will discuss briefly their transitions from apartheid political activists to NGO practitioners and the ways this helped create the ethos of STEPS, the organization.

Chap 5 – The birth of an NGO: from ideologies to organizational culture

5.0 Abstract

In this chapter I will present my findings on ways that members of STEPS, primarily the decision-makers I have discussed in Chapter 4, have been instrumental in shaping the organization’s vision and character. I have given a detailed account on the origin of STEPS as an organization in Chapter 3, allowing for subsequent chapters to strongly feature the subjectivities of my participants. As Don mentioned in his interview, the work done in Lesotho had profound effects on the methodological approaches of the organization. I have found that not only this but the very way of being of these key decision-makers have also transferred to the culture of the organization. I posit that the present ethos of STEPS has been shaped largely by the habitus of Don, Marianne and Laurence who have had interconnected lives for over two decades and whose previous work and ideologies have highly influenced the organization. Though I have denoted three individuals whose past experiences, habits and predisposed ways of seeing the world directly impact upon the ethos of the organization, the other members being acted upon and thusly acting also comprise the organizational culture and character of STEPS.

5.1 From hippie media activists to alternative NGOers

Nyamnjoh (2013:658) incorporates Bourdieu (1996), Wacquant (1996) and Calhoun (2000) when discussing the concept of “mobility” citing that “...humans are mobile with their social backgrounds, positions and *habitus* – that to which they are habituated, and which they seek to reproduce even as they are open to improvisation and adaptation to varying degrees.” He furthers that people “are mobile with the ideas, beliefs, practices, and social and material culture we are used to, and which we usually try to reproduce or adapt on our own terms” (ibid). By exploring the historical makings of STEPS decision-makers I have come to understand that the concept of mobility is quite apt when contemplating the transfer of a similar set – habitus, ideas, beliefs, practices – that have been brought into the field of development.

After apartheid ended the decision-makers of STEPS did not follow the trajectory of some activists by joining the ranks of new state institutions within South Africa. They also opted out of working within large organizational entities or corporate bodies. Rather than work in such environments Laurence shared with me that he “*didn’t want to become a part of the new establishment*” but he found himself in a conundrum:

...I sat back and said well now what do you do and very quickly thereafter, one saw that the liberation movement and the ANC wasn’t going to create a new sort of utopia and everything would be fantastic and they would be democratic and social justice and all the rest of expectations one had. So by 1998, 99 it was pretty clear that there was a lot of inequality and injustice.²⁰

Vigh (2006:426) says that “it must be emphasized that as we move in our social world our horizons change around us, affecting both our vistas (and hence points of view) and our attainable social positions.” Friedman and Mottiar (2004) discuss some of the changes in the socio-political conditions in the *new* South Africa that brought on varying degrees of opportunities for collective movements and advocacy allowing for

²⁰ Interview with Laurence, STEPS office, Cape Town, 10th September 2015

organizations like STEPS to be actualized. They outlined that firstly, democracy became a theoretical reality that opened up legal rights of protest, opposition and “collective action” without “threat of repression” (ibid: para 19). And secondly, the neoliberal policies of government, rather than building up an already fragile social base, deteriorated it further leaving gaping holes for civil society organizations and movements to fill. These changes to the socio-political climate in South Africa would pull Laurence out of his early retirement from activism.

In line with Nyamnjoh’s (2013) discussion on “mobility,” the media activist work of my participants discussed in the previous chapter molded a habitus and skillset that would allow for them to work in the new “deracializing civil society” (Mamdani, 1996:145). Though not particularly inflamed with passion for the HIV/AIDS cause itself, Laurence could not ignore this new struggle within South Africa that dominated discussions, debates and civil society activity. Likewise, Don and Marianne while living in Lesotho and after moving to Cape Town were thrust into the political fight of HIV/AIDS through their own stories of awareness. True to the spirit of their activist mindset, they would engage with whatever injustice pulled on their heartstrings in whichever society they lived. When talking to Don about why he joined this new post-apartheid political fight he shared with me one of the defining moments that sparked his awareness:

...when we were running our mobile cinema in Lesotho, this one point I remember very clearly was when this man in the village stood up, way up in the mountains, and said “look I’ve been hearing about this thing called HIV, I don’t believe we have it here. Do you have any films about it?” All we could say is we have a film from Uganda. And he says “we know it’s there but not here.” And that was the first time I started realizing that there’s something happening here that I’m not hooked into cause it wasn’t affecting me.²¹

²¹ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

5.2 Socialization to become

As media activists utilizing film, they were able to carve out a niche that could seldom be filled by other NGOs. David Lush (Edkins and Vehkalahti, 2008:178), one of the early contributors to the foundational *Steps for the Future* project describes:

For quite a while, some of us had been banging on to funders and filmmakers alike about the potential of using video for activism, and the need to explore facilitated discussion as a way of enabling audiences to understand better the subject matter of films. A few video activists were dabbling in this approach, but few funders – and even fewer filmmakers – were interested. So by making this commitment, STEPS took a small but significant step towards breaking down the barriers between producers, subjects and audiences.

After creating the catalogue of films which subsequently were aired locally and internationally on major broadcast networks project leaders found that the next phase, outreach through partner organizations, was lacking because non-profits were not accustomed to using documentary as an interventionist tool making facilitation difficult (Edkins and Vehkalahti, 2008:178). This prompted the STEPS team, led by Don (and previously informed by Marianne's construction of the methodology in Lesotho)²², to create training programs on how to utilize the films in order to enhance the outreach capacity of the partner organizations. Again, through their cultural capital accrued in a previous space and time the activists created a niche that would prove to be a key practice of the organization. Subsequently, they bridged the gap between filmmaking and its cultural outputs for use in outreach, a practice unfamiliar to the average development practitioner.

²² *In the early years of STEPS, Marianne was largely an outsider from the organization, utilizing its resources for intervention projects at women's jails she worked with through a previous organization. However, her partnership and longstanding work and personal relationship with Don in Lesotho helped shape STEPS even before her direct involvement. Marianne became a key figure in the organization when she joined officially, not only fashioning the methodology that STEPS adapted from Sesotho Media but also finding an active role in shaping the Trainer of Trainers (TOT) program and carrying on the foundational work of Steps for the Future, a defining project for the STEPS organization.*

Through the process of the *Steps for the Future* campaign the key decision-makers would go through habitus transformations in order to practice functionally as professional NGO practitioners. The HIV/AIDS crisis, though a political fight according to Don, and the post-apartheid government's failures, according to Laurence, required a new framing and different set of tools. Additionally, Day Zero was a registered production company but not a registered NGO (non-profit) under South African law so in order to properly acquire and handle funding that eventually began pouring into the project from broadcasters and international donors, it was an opportune time to "walk the walk, and talk the talk" of an NGO professional (Edkins and Vehkalahti, 2008). As they moved into and within this new social space their "vistas" were indeed altered and they positioned themselves accordingly (Vigh, 2006:426).

I think everything you do that you learn from creates a building block and so you learn from experience. I don't think it's something you can be taught. And a lot of it is gut feeling. A lot of what we do or did or decided was really from a gut feeling, like, "eh we gotta do this" without really thinking it through really, deeply. It's like you get an idea, yes it's right or no it's not right. – Don²³

Though Don and his colleagues did not take a course on *how* to do advocacy work, over the years attending workshops and having clear guidelines and regulations from funders and the government would be another form of educating and transforming their habitus in order to learn how to play the game aptly. The rules of the game, which needed to be adhered to in the form of reporting on impact and activities, were things outside of the realm of filmmaking they were used to. But it was the ability to produce the films including acquiring a substantial amount of economic capital that gave them credibility enough to enter the development field. I talked to Don about his own transformation since working in media advocacy, his having a very strong international focus where he deals with the professional side of filmmaking to another degree than his fellow colleagues at STEPS, and he responded:

²³ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town 15th October 2015

*I think it is pretty much out of the whole Steps for the Future experience because when you start collaborating with like-minded partners and not assholes...and when you are learning from people and you can see what that does to your own capacity that is something that is very good to nurture and to pass on to others.*²⁴

5.3 Ideologies, ethos and organizational culture

I chose, as crucial to my study, to examine the habitus of the key decision-makers at STEPS because I assessed during my time in the field that they held the most power to influence practices and the culture within the organization. However, my assertion and strong emphasis on the habitus of the key decision-makers does not omit the tenacious identities and dispositions of the present STEPS team from its part in helping to construct the ethos of the organization.

“Organizational culture is the set of values, norms, guiding beliefs and understandings that is shared by members of an organization and is taught to new members...[and]...it represents the largely unwritten, feeling part of the organization” (Daft, Murphy and Willmott, 2007:399-400). Don and other key decision-makers did not imprint upon the other staff how to view the world in which they live and work but rather these individuals had to have a certain vision and position-taking, habitus and capitals that would land them the job and keep them employed. For instance, Theresa, the General Manager, rather than working in a more “*corporatey*”, “*sleek*” “*slick and full of egos*” work environment, opted for STEPS saying: “*It feels good to work for an organization that does something worthwhile.*”²⁵

At the strategic meeting in January 2015 the group determined that the culture of STEPS is one associated with “*honesty and integrity, ethical and professional behavior, empowerment, transparency and quality,*” as recollected by Theresa during our interview.²⁶ And, though this is stated as the “*culture*” of the organization, I find it to be

²⁴ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town 15th October 2015

²⁵ Interview with Theresa, STEPS office, Cape Town 1st October 2015

²⁶ Interview with Theresa, STEPS office, Cape Town 1st October 2015

more in-line with individual performance aims that most organizations would want their staff to aspire to. As such, I return back to my key participants and the foundations they laid that have been built upon to construct, what I deem from my observations, as the most prominent culture of STEPS. Firstly, there is a culture of “human rights activism” resulting in a strong moral need to intercede in social injustices of vulnerable groups and individuals even though not directly affected by the issue themselves. Secondly, STEPS sees their brand of advocacy as more genuine and ethical, positioning themselves against the grain of most mainstream NGOs with top-down approaches to development practice, primarily from the North. This pronounces a culture of what I will refer to as “the anti-dominant.” Lastly, there is a culture of “collectivism” fitting to the histories of key decision-makers who are not accustomed to highly bureaucratic, competition heavy or individualistic working environments but rather collective action around a central cause.

5.3.1 Human rights as ethos

A lot of what we try to do is to provide opportunities for people in the world who have had less opportunities than others – Don²⁷

My participants have a strong belief in human rights embodied in speech and practices reflective of the emergence of rights-based approaches (RBA) in development discourse and practice (VeneKlasen et al., 2004:1). “*We do rights-based approaches*” Marianne shared with me during one of my visits to the *Steps for the Future* office.²⁸ Nelson and Dorsey (2008:19) define rights-based approaches to development as encompassing “social, economic, or development policy, at local, national, or international levels, which makes explicit reference to internationally recognized human rights standards.” More and more development agencies are making the shift towards these approaches (VeneKlasen et al., *ibid*:3). Such shifts are even impacting mainstream development “...leading to the isolation and even the delegitimization and defunding of some development programs and counterparts” (VeneKlasen et al., *ibid*). The “language of human rights” (Ochoa

²⁷ Interview with Don, STEPS Cape Town, 25th September 2015

²⁸ Interview with Marianne, STEPS office, Cape Town, 11th September 2015

2003:57) in development rhetoric is becoming fundamental within the sector and practitioners and activists use it to advocate for what they deem as a human need worth fighting for whether it proves effective in the literal sense or not.

We got lucky with the people we employed who all have a similar kind of moral compass. We may think differently about various things but on the important issues about human rights and how to treat people, we are all on the same page as far as that's concerned. It's been like a learning curve but I think it's something that has come quite naturally to all of us. – Theresa²⁹

My participants have embodied the philosophy of human rights and feature it as a main criteria in project choices. The work of key decision-makers prior to STEPS has always held the tenets of human rights discourse within their socio-political activism. It was an easily transferrable ideological concept to build the culture of the organization on. Marianne, when discussing the ongoing LGBTI campaign said certainly, “*don't separate LGBTI from human rights.*”³⁰ Similarly, STEPS has also categorized stigma and discrimination of HIV/AIDS individuals as a human rights issue, a sentiment expressed within and beyond their borders from the many local NGOs who also took on HIV/AIDS as a cause and the many international donors who set that as an agenda in their programs.

5.3.2 The “anti-dominant” spirit

“There is an unspoken assumption that ‘speaking on behalf of the voiceless’ and thus, advancing rights...will ensure better lives for the marginalized” (VeneKlasen et al., 2004:3). Yet, there is a struggle within STEPS that speaks to the point I made above, that of the “anti-dominant” spirit within the organization. “*I hate saying giving a voice to the voiceless but...*” Marianne said during one of our talks.³¹ The key decision-makers have consigned themselves to the rhetoric of the sector but their entry into the field originally as media political activists and not as trained development practitioners coupled with the

²⁹ Interview with Theresa, STEPS office, Cape Town, 1st October 2015

³⁰ Interview with Marianne, STEPS office, Cape Town, 11th September 2015

³¹ Interview with Marianne, STEPS Cape Town, 22nd September 2015

heavy critiques of development's failures which is not just an academic discussion but also quite pronounced in the discourses of practitioners has left them at odds with the overall system befitting their politicized habitus. STEPS staff members despite their strong commitment to a human rights ideology often pit themselves at odds with the very sector they work in, rhetoric notwithstanding.

It is about "*the power of the lived experience...[and]...informed decisions*" says Marianne of the overall methodology.³² Discomfort in saying things like "*being a voice to the voiceless*" or "bunny ears" anytime they must engage with the jargon of the industry makes them seem more of media practitioners providing a service to NGOs than development folk themselves. I can see it has to do with their aversion to the core development thought that Pieterse (2010:117) deems "steeped in social engineering" and telling people what to do, an approach they have positioned themselves strongly against and reflective in how they construct films for outreach. This same development thinking is what brings a sense of alienation for STEPS as an organization from the dominant field in theory and practice. In telling me about the construction of the organization's mission statement one staff member also showed the "anti" that is STEPS' ethos when saying "*We did have an extensive session about that. It was really difficult to come up with something that didn't sound terrible and NGOish.*" In asking them about the apprehension to being "*NGOish*" she added:

I certainly don't think we are the only people doing things the way we do it but I think there is a certain sort of stream or way of doing things that are people coming from the North generally to Africa or outsiders, people non-African, coming with a sense that they know better. And they may have good intentions, they probably all have good intentions, most of them, but they do come with that, we're coming to teach you how to do things better and they lose sight of the fact that the only way you can get people to help themselves is to empower them and if you're just coming to deliver a service or give a hand out then you're actually not empowering them...I think that's why we're so fiercely

³² Interview with Marianne, STEPS Cape Town, 22nd September 2015

*'anti' that approach. We want to be able to do things that make a difference otherwise what's the point of doing it? Doing it because the funders say we should do it?*³³

5.3.3 Collectivism as ethos

*We know each other so well and we respect the work each other is doing. We have this open door culture where at anytime you can go to somebody else and ask for support. There is an openness to ask and share with other people, "hey what do you think about this project. Do you want to come and join. There is quite a togetherness on that."*³⁴



Jannie driving Elaine to a training of facilitators (TOF) workshop with learners from Scalabrini
(Photo credit: Patrice Carter)

STEPS as an organization houses a non-hierarchical collective with free flowing ideas and strong work ethic representative of collectivism as ethos. A collectivist culture

³³ Interview with Anonymous STEPS staff member, STEPS office, Cape Town 22nd September 2015

³⁴ Interview with Marianne, STEPS office, Cape Town 21st September 2015

consist of interdependencies within a group setting where a major emphasis is placed on maintaining strong internal group relationships and “norms” (Triandis 2001:909). Unlike the highly bureaucratic organizations learned of in ethnographies on development like Mosse’s (2005) accounts, STEPS appears devoid of such internal structures, hierarchical dominance and individualism. STEPS practitioners have worked together for many years beyond the scope of the foundational *Steps for the Future* project and where some organizations have folded for one reason or another it has remained staffed and funded despite the precarities of the volatile sector. Most of my participants have shared that one of the reasons they are still with STEPS is because of the overall work environment. People seem to like the non-bureaucratic flow of the organization where roles are loosely defined more by project and day-to-day duties rather than stringent targets and appraisals of job performance. Further, I have observed and experienced that no individual’s work overlaps another in such a way that could cause a competition for resources, position or titles.

5.3.3.1 “Who’s the boss?”: decentralization and cutting the red tape of bureaucracy

At STEPS a culture of promotion is replaced by a culture of evolution and addition to current duties when the need arises. For instance, at the strategic meeting in January 2015 the group chuckled when trying to pinpoint a suitable title for Theresa. They settled on General Manager as fitting for her overall work scope though these duties were always aspects of her roles and responsibilities from the very beginning. I have noted the same with Jannie, STEPS’ *Distribution Manager* whose present duties include tasks from the onset of his career with the organization when he was a production assistant.

My work contract states: “Your job title does not define or restrict your duties and you may be requested to perform other duties and responsibilities by your employer.” This pronouncement does not translate to being worked to the bone but allows for room to grow and is often financially compensated. As such changes are typically informed by new funded initiatives or cash flow into the organization. “*At STEPS, we don’t do titles,*”

Marianne told me.³⁵ The hierarchy of titles is seldom discussed unless needed for appropriate approvals and signatures. These blurred lines as a result include my own ignorance, having not been aware that Laurence was the *Managing Director* of the organization for many months after joining. I assumed the role to have been Don's especially considering Laurence's demeanor, one lacking an endowed with such power pomp. And Don also, despite me being the newest member, on several occasions he has introduced me as his colleague rather than pronouncing himself as my superior in which he undoubtedly is.

As the story goes, in the beginning Don was the *Director* at STEPS but Laurence took over the role when his attention was needed for STEPS International, the global project that produced *WhyDemocracy?* and *WhyPoverty?*. When the latter projects ended and Don returned to more active participation in STEPS South Africa, Laurence maintained the title and Don carried on as *Chairman* of the board and one could say *Executive Producer* of *AfriDocs* and other projects he creates under STEPS' umbrella. His formal title is still one that brings laughter at staff meetings without a clear answer or seeming discomfort between the two men.

There are very unspoken but known parameters at STEPS based on projects. This approach has seemed to work to maintain a harmonious work environment that allows the organization to become an umbrella for many activities that key decision-makers are interested in pursuing so long as it fits within the vision of the NGO and the agendas of funders. As a result, there is an inclusive approach to decision-making that is project based – Marianne, Elaine and Laurence for *Steps for The Future* and me, Don and Theresa with *AfriDocs*. Laurence tends to be an island all by himself with *CareTakers* as the rest of us do not work on the project but from what I observe with him and his partner in the project George, there also seems to be an inclusive approach to decision-making and action steps. The hierarchy of power is evident in final vetoes but rarely hard lined as it comes with many, “is everyone ok with this.” The freedom of movement within projects also shows a culture of apprehension to bureaucratic rhetoric. For instance, I was

³⁵ Interview with Marianne, STEPS office, Cape Town, 21st September 2015

not subjected to a round of interviews during my hiring process that involved the *Director* or any other member of staff, something another NGO may have required. My interviewers, however, were Don and Theresa, two key members of the organization and the interview was centered on *AfriDocs*, a project that would solely involve the three of us.

Further, there is no culture of evaluation and monitoring of work performances. Bonuses and salary increases are given yearly to everyone irrespective of performance. I have been told by several of the staff that they like working at STEPS because of the work culture and I get a strong sense that to many members the collectivist ethos breeds a spirit of family rather than a mundane job. Overall there seems to be a shared responsibility towards each other that plays out in the teamwork and individual work approaches that I have observed. Down to the hunt for funding, a quite tedious solo journey for some key decision-makers, displays this deep sense of responsibility. When discussing the precarity of the dominant development field I asked one staff member why they would maintain working in such an unpredictable sector and they answered:

*I think for a number of reasons. I like the work that we do. I like the culture of the org. I like that there's nobody breathing over my shoulder. And even though I don't have power to do what I want to do, mostly it's fine, it's just a conversation that needs to happen. So I like that. I don't feel like there's anything that can't be discussed here as difficult as some things may be. It's not because I'm afraid. And the times where things have been a bit rough for me, I've gotten great support from people here so there's really no reason for me to leave.*³⁶

5.4 Conclusion

Despite the precarity of the overall sector, the organization, that being its members, appear insular to me, almost protected. The operations at STEPS are reflective of the subfield (if one were constructed by me in this thesis) – a created space with its own

³⁶ Interview with Anonymous STEPS staff member, STEPS office, Cape Town, 22nd September 2015

inner-workings that do not necessarily mirror that of the dominant sector. As Laurence shared during our interview, “[I] drifted into this and then we set up STEPS.”³⁷ My participants have learned much along this career journey, hitting it big with their foundational *Steps for the Future* project to the scaled down versions of smaller interventions in southern Africa centered around themes on human rights injustices like LGBTI rights and then there is the potential for new global projects. I have discussed the key decision-makers entry into the field and subsequent habitus formations and the ways in which I observed its manifestations in the ethos of the organization. When I consider Laurence who has been a political activist for majority of his adult life it appears like a way of life for him. Don and Marianne, the same. They have the activist spirit and filmmaker sensibilities and skill to navigate the sector in a unique manner. In the proceeding chapter I will continue the road from habitus to ethos to finally, practices of the organization. From this conclusive study I hope to display how an organization has been shaped by its members and how such an institution, molded as it has been, navigates within the terrain of a contentious development apparatus.

Chap 6 – Navigating development: the practices of STEPS, the organization

6.0 Abstract

In this chapter I aim to discuss the significant practices of STEPS that display how they navigate precarity in the South African development space. These strategies, I argue, can be traced to the habitus of key decision-makers. The interaction between the challenges presented by the field, the habitus of key decision-makers and their accrued capital are linked to the navigated adoption of subversive and conservative practices. Such strategies are evident in STEPS’ internal organizational processes, partnership structures and auxiliary projects outside of the scope of mainstream development practices. As such, this chapter will outline the overarching structural forces associated with funding challenges and shifting development agendas and underscore the strategic, flexible,

³⁷ Interview with Laurence, STEPS office, Cape Town, 17th September 2015

practices that key decision-makers have created to navigate this precarious manifestation of power that structures the development field. Ultimately, it will be shown that these strategies were embodied within the agency of the habitus and the capital at the disposal of key decision-makers.

6.1 Funding: navigating the structural elephant in the room

Scandinavian governments had always been supporting the struggle against apartheid in various ways but also culturally and at some point after the end of apartheid the Scandinavian governments trying to figure out: well, what support should they be making now? How should they be continuing their support but in a different way? – Don³⁸

“The World Bank began lending in 1948, and the [development] field grew slowly in the 1950s but more rapidly in the 1960s, accelerating in the 1970s and 1980s until by 2000 development assistance was a \$64 billion annual enterprise” (Nelson and Dorsey, 2008:13). Correlating to the boom of NGOs in the 1980s along with increased funding dollars to them during this same period, competition for such resources grew rapidly (Edelman and Haugerud, 2005:27). Countries in the North dominate the funding dollars globally, making dependent “partner” NGOs in the South. They are able to reinforce thematic agendas and influence practices giving them power to set the *doxa* of the game in the development field.³⁹ Funding insecurity is ever-present irrespective of the type or size of an organization, what access to human capital is available to them or their program’s impact success rate in the field. The limited access to funding makes calls for proposals from funders a critical stake in the competition within the sector in South Africa and beyond. What I have seen throughout my ethnographic research is the strong influence donor bodies have on the field. Navigating the funding space is crucial to an NGO in the Global South, yet it is a destabilizing, precarious situation.

³⁸ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

³⁹The Global North tends to dictate to the Global South largely, with agendas and ways of doing things that fit their framework and development model, especially considering some donors are extensions of their governments (Fisher 1997:451) giving them not only economic capital but also the same symbolic and cultural capital accrued by a governmental body.

6.1.1 Navigating through funder fit

Donors typically have very clear briefs and guidelines for the type of projects or entities they will fund. NGOs find themselves constantly having to bend to these specificities in order to have access to the needed capital. Indeed, most of my participants had strong feelings on the donor-dominated sector in which they were situated. One staff member said “...*I feel a lot of funders are short-sighted and governed by their own rules and regulations...you can’t fund a project or an organization...for like 2 years and then go, now we’ve given you enough money and you must just get on with it. How do people do that?*”⁴⁰ Though partnership as the hallmark for collaborative organizational relationships has been a global buzzword for some time (Fowler, 2000; Abugre, 1999) Ashman (2001) points out that some of the pressure put on the receiving end of donor-recipient *partnership* has in part to do with the power dynamics of those even further along the food chain than the institution cutting the check. Ashman (2001) denotes one of the central issues in the partnership paradigm has to do with the Northern bodies’ accountability to its own government and donors. As Pearce (2010:626) posits when considering Latin American NGOs, “[m]any of these NGOs have in turn been forced to justify their work to their own governmental and multilateral donors, and they have therefore transferred these pressures to their...‘partners.’” One way STEPS has navigated this terrain is through the *type* of funder “partnerships” they have acquired to date.

Like any partnership, there needs to be something that binds the pair together harmoniously. Considering the work scope of STEPS, the best fit for them would be funding partners that either understood the advantages of media within development practice or themselves used media in their practices. Also, organizational structure of the donor is important. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report (2004:81) discussing the characteristics of foundations as donors notes their autonomy from governmental bodies allowing for a willingness “to take risks, to consider programmes that will only produce benefits in the long term, and to experiment with highly decentralised organisational structures [sic].” STEPS presently have funding

⁴⁰ Interview with Anonymous STEPS staff member, Cape Town office, 17th September 2015.

from four donors, three of which are international donor bodies, amassing economic capital from its projects totaling in the low millions (South African Rand).⁴¹ Of the four donor bodies keeping the organization's ship sailing, one is a British foundation with a strong media and advocacy focus often supporting creative projects around film and activism at tertiary levels, another is a faith-based German developmental institution and the other is a German NGO with strong human rights commitments. All three organizations have been funding STEPS for many years and I believe the type of innovative development work STEPS is committed to along with the successes of the previous *Steps for the Future* HIV/AIDS project has given them clout enough to sustain long-term commitments from these funders that themselves can be considered unique. From a distance (considering I did not have access to donor insights) it would appear that many of these characteristics within the framework of foundations can be applied to these organizations to the benefit of STEPS.

6.1.2 The moving and shifting agendas in development

Shifts in development discourse and practice to be more inclusive of a rights-based approach is evident in the field. VeneKlasen et al. (2004:17) assert that “many development organisations have sought to complement their service delivery and livelihood efforts with advocacy strategies [sic]” or to eliminate a “needs-based focus” in favor of concentrating on rights. Informing some of these shifts are reports by major authoritative institutions like the UN and others that governments and organizations consult to legitimize their agendas. For example, a report by the United States Department of State (2013) acknowledged the rampant crimes against the LGBTI community in Lesotho. And though not claiming a direct link, consider the LGBTI focus of current STEPS films in Lesotho. Despite the fact that the organization also became aware of the theme because it is thematically connected to HIV/AIDS discourse in development and having also been challenged by those they knew in the community to take up the issue, funder approval for the project can be conjectured as a result of an overall shift in global development discourse that legitimated the LGBTI crisis in

⁴¹ *This figure changes annually and is dependent on the project and the total funding cycle which is usually 1-3 years.*

Southern Africa as a human rights abuse.

This shifting agenda can sometimes have negative implications for stakeholders. “Precarity...relates to a situation where there is a lack of predictability and security...[often impacting]...material and psychological well-being” (Baines et al., 2014:78). Relating this to a funder’s shifting agenda, precarity is exemplar in the sustainability of the organization being delegated to and can have a ripple effect. For instance, one of the facilitators trained by STEPS years prior became unemployed when the organization she worked for lost core funding due to donor agenda shifts away from HIV/AIDS. The fairly large organization supported smaller non-profits who subsequently had to close their doors because of the loss. Additionally, there have been shifts within not just themes in programming but how funders choose to fund.

There is a global move towards project-based funding (1-3 years) rather than core funding (long term) due to “fiscal pressures of governments” furthering the human capital woes within the sector (Baines et al., 2014:79-81). The stability of core funding is necessary to sustain the overhead of organizations between projects whereas in contrast project funding “narrowly prescribes how funding can be spent...severely...[compromising]...the financial stability of the infrastructure and ongoing operational budgets of nonprofits” (Baines et al., 2014:79). This further impacts things like paying competitive wages in order to secure qualified staff as crucial in a sector like South Africa already impacted by the loss of capable staff to government or private sector jobs. Further, when considering the competitive proposal-writing phase needed to acquire support, attaining funding every 1-3 years without the assets of qualified staff or existing economic capital becomes quite a conundrum indeed.

This shift in funding type has resulted in what Shields (2014; cited by Baines et al., 2014:80-81) calls “‘permanent temporariness’...[an]...employment structure...[so embedded]...into the DNA of the sector” that job instability and precarity become the norm. As such, NGO practitioners are constantly operating in a position of “vulnerability, instability, marginality and temporariness...[where the very organization themselves

are]...under a continuous threat of defunding, placing their on-going operation on a kind of temporariness footing” as well (Shields, 2014; cited by Baines et al., 2014:78). I have observed these things at STEPS also.

STEPS was well funded by the Swedish government in the beginning until the donor body went through a restructuring that eventually phased out their HIV/AIDS agenda. With this source of capital no longer available the organization went through a period of instability and a questionable future. It was a wake up call for STEPS that led to one-year contracts to keep staff members aware of the ever-present funding insecurity within the field. Despite all of its successes from the acclaimed *Steps for the Future* project, the organization could not guarantee they would be operational from year to year and thusly were not able to contractually promise employment beyond 12 months. Within STEPS, as a means of navigating the precarities of funding uncertainties, a need for conservatism as practice became a part of their own DNA. But how they would go about this agentic movement spoke back to their years of experience in film as well as the habitus of core decision-makers.

Producing the coveted *Steps for the Future* project helped them shape a type of organization that operated similar to production companies – a small specialized and flexible core in house team and additional people brought in, like myself, when new projects, need or funding allowed for it. Marianne, Don, Elaine and Laurence are those actively in the field while support comes from Theresa, Jannie, Ingrid, Elie, Pochia and myself. The partner network is another way to multiply efforts and project reach despite limited human capital in house. Also, key decision-makers give staff members a sense of security. When discussing with some support staff about the unpredictability of their jobs, one said: *“I mean there’s always a tiny bit of a panic cause...it’s a small organization but there’s lots of running cost...so I think...those people are always thinking about how do we make this happen and keep these people employed...I think if things were going to shut down here one would know about it in ample time.”*⁴² When I asked another staff member why they thought STEPS has survived for so long they shared: *“I think because*

⁴² Interview with Anonymous STEPS Staff Member, STEPS office, Cape Town, 8th October 2015

of the initiative from Don, mostly from his connections and his vision. ...I mean strangely when I use to work in other fields I was always concerned about where the money was going to come from but with Don you just know. Because he is so driven and so committed and probably because he has one of the best teams behind him. [But if Don wasn't there], STEPS wouldn't be taken out of the equation. We have made a name for ourselves, we are such a strong business so somehow it will continue.”⁴³

The key decision-makers' inherent ability to find the money through their social capital and networks, and their habitus of ingenuity and sense of responsibility to the welfare of others, found in the collectivist ethos of the organization, has built a confidence amongst staff that despite all else STEPS, as a whole, will be “OK.” Yet as indicative of the conditions discussed above, the organization's funding is predominately project-based despite some donors having funded the organization consistently for years. Furthermore, the need for so many donors is another example of the instability within the sector. If STEPS only had funding from a sole donor its operations would be dramatically crippled despite that funder's commitment to the project or organization. Overall, they find themselves in the same boat as many NGOs in the Global South – on shaky ground.

6.2 STEPS as a multi-cause focused NGO

Funding concerns are constant creating a workforce incentivized to please the donor. Articulations of such practice includes putting the original mission and themes of the organization on the backburner in order to prioritize the funder's agenda or a pressurized work environment centered on showing impact upon implementation of projects, or within short term interventions before project cycles end. My participants expressed this time and time again. Considering such power relations illustrates to me that the funder is one of the most powerful, if not *the* most powerful entity in the development field because they are invaluable to an NGO who cannot function or, in many cases, exist without them.

⁴³ Interview with Anonymous STEPS Staff Member, STEPS office, Cape Town, 17th September 2015

As another form of navigating through agentic movement within the structural movement of development, Rossi (2004:23) pointing to the collective studies done by Bierschenk, Chauveau and Olivier de Sardan (2000), has argued that weaker positioned stakeholders in development may “‘buy into’ dominant discourses” in order to “‘strategically’” manipulate them to serve their own end goals. She explains that some strategies include shaping projects around dominant themes, that I posit, can be used as a tool by actors to stay in the game or remain legitimate and funder friendly. I also conjecture that knowing how to navigate the terrain of development includes what Rossi (ibid:24) using Bourdieu (1991:20) says is being aware of the “‘forms and formalities’ governing that field at a specific time.” Rossi (ibid:23) explains that “...discursive conformity (‘wearing the same uniform’) should not be automatically taken as evidence of strategic convergence...[but rather]...less powerful actors...[are]...instrumentally or subversively...[using]...dominant definitions to pursue their own agendas.” Indeed, I have observed these subversive and conservative agentic movements within STEPS as well.

When discussing with Don on his present proposal that is floating in the development-verse waiting for support from an international donor I asked about his decision to include migration as a key theme of the project. He answered:

No, I mean, its always been a theme in there...we always looked at migration being one of the results of inequality and poverty. And looking at that within Africa when you're looking at young people and their future, of course migration has always been part of it...But then, to also see that it fits as a hook to focus the project on kind of directly because there are so many issues attached to migration. So if the thing is youth, their challenges and opportunities, migration is a big part of that, as well as education, as well as unemployment, as well as corruption, all these things...were there anyhow in our thinking around the project.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town, 15th October 2015

Attaining and maintaining funding is strategic. Despite their subversive alternative approaches and avoidance of “UNICEF bullshit,” (Edkins and Vehkalahti, 2008) STEPS still has to adhere to dominant discourses within the development space in order to stay in the game. And as it goes, the STEPS staff I have interviewed agree that the donor is crucial to an organization and in many cases, as the more powerful stakeholder in development, their agenda sets the tone. However, it is not impossible to have good donor relationships of mutual benefit and an organization can maneuver to strategically position themselves in order to achieve this as Don’s response indicates. STEPS’ approach, informed by the habitus of its members and the overall ethos of the organization, appears to be about flexibility and creativity and one way to do that is to find themes within donor agendas that are in line with project goals for the organization. An example of this is the youth focus of most of STEPS’ current projects.

I was told that initially youth was not a targeted theme for the organization but when they noticed funding trends moving away from HIV/AIDS towards broader themes such as this, they reviewed their work scope and saw that youth were a large part of the discourse and interventions on HIV/AIDS, making this transition plausible and less riddled with need for capacity building to adapt. Theresa, on this matter:

...maybe it did inform a little bit, the direction that we took but it was a good one for us. I mean the youth are going to always be important. And you can deal with the LGBTI stuff, whatever issues of identity, of belonging, of safety. All of those things are relevant.⁴⁵

Don and Marianne, in their previous work, had no bonds to a cause opting to instead work on various social injustices in their present surroundings. Laurence’s activism centered on the apartheid struggle and once that shifted he saw new opportunities within the new political arena to lend his spirit to. Moving into multiple causes according to thematic shifts in discourse and practices in the field were plausible for an organization that’s members were use to flowing in the winds of their ambition and ideologies. This proved to be a fitting habitus trait for navigating in the sector making them able, and

⁴⁵ Interview with Theresa, STEPS office, Cape Town, 1st October 2015

apparently willing, to alter their steps if need be to maintain donor relationships and procure new funders as long as the agenda maintained a human rights focus. They are not hard lined advocates for one thing but for many things that fall under the umbrella of “social injustice” as opposed to activist groups who push one constant agenda like LGBTI rights and awareness. When I discussed STEPS’ evolution to multiple themes with Theresa, she asserted:

...[We] realized that we need to focus on sort of a broader spectrum of issues and they were human rights based issues rather than just HIV/AIDS. And I think we’ve managed to go with the flow with that one but we haven’t changed our thinking about how we do things since we’ve encompassed more stuff. That’s worked out for us in terms of accessing more funding. But I can see how that’s a problem for organizations...If you’re focused on one kind of thing and the funding runs out for that, what are you suppose to do?⁴⁶

Key decision-makers have structured a multi-cause organization as one way of navigating the sector. One way to move within the *movement* of development is to go with its flow. Now that I have described some of the precarities of this contentious sector with constant shifts consistent with structural movement that Vigh’s concept of navigation explores, I want to discuss ways that power can shift and actors can reposition themselves from a disempowered place to one of autonomy, perhaps not from all structures, but in order to maintain some level of *being* within a constricted relational system. STEPS largely uses conservative strategies when dealing with the funder and larger dominating forces as one mode of navigating the space. They attempt to maintain legitimacy through the inclusion of funder agendas. And, though it is understood that power can be hidden and may go unnoticed or be taken-for-granted, Gavey (1989; cited by Gallant, 2008:245) notes “that in order for power to change, the discourse must shift.”

⁴⁶ Interview with Theresa, STEPS office, Cape Town, 1st October 2015

6.3 Shifting Power: bringing the filmmaker to the field

Strategies in play in the relational systems within development “are embedded in structures of knowledge which shape agency” (Rossi, 2004:26). Mostly, those working at STEPS perceive their organization as operating uniquely from the majority of rights-based NGOs in South Africa. The habitus of key decision-makers within STEPS has shaped their approaches to filmmaking for social change that are contrary to mainstream development discourse. This opens up possibilities in areas of funding, projects and ways to sustain the organization that other NGOs may not have access to. Their status as experts in media advocacy is, in essence, knowledge housed in power.

Salamon, Hems and Chinnock (2000:6) point out that “since the nonprofit form is potentially available to anyone with an idea, we might expect this sector to be an incubator for new ideas and approaches for identifying and solving public problems... nonprofit organizations can be expected to be pioneers in particular fields, identifying unaddressed issues and focusing attention on them, formulating new approaches to problems, and generally serving as a source of innovation in the solution of societal problems.” As already noted, NGOs are quite diverse in their orientation, organizational structure and agendas, as such, there is no ‘one trick pony’ to deploy as interventions to rights-based development approaches (Nelson and Dorsey, 2008:92-93) and this can be seen as a strength for STEPS. In the transition from being a project to an organization they aptly looked for an acronym that *sounded* “NGOey...[and kept]... ‘Steps’...[in the name].⁴⁷ Laurence came up with “Social Transformation and Empowerment Projects” and thus began the journey of bringing the filmmaker into the field.

6.3.1 The power tools of documentary and democracy

As filmmakers, STEPS’ executive team possess an “expert” level of how to use the film medium as a strategy in development practices. In this way, they merge development and

⁴⁷ Interview with Anonymous STEPS Staff Member, STEPS office, Cape Town, 17th September 2015

film discourses and create a shift in power where funders are the ones “buying in” to STEPS’ rhetoric. For instance, one of STEPS’ funders enlisted the production company to produce a film on the church’s role in sexuality and gender. This film would feature an HIV/AIDS positive female pastor as the protagonist and would be made outside of the ongoing projects. In essence, the funder approached them for their expertise, shifting power to STEPS that held the cultural capital.

As already detailed in previous sections, scholars like Levine (2003, 2007), through her extensive ethnographic research on the foundational *Steps for the Future* HIV/AIDS media intervention, found the medium of documentary film to be a conduit for discussion, awareness and change in communities. Furthermore, STEPS went beyond the medium of mainstream media advocacy’s use of film to incorporate alternative storytelling. Films loudly preaching behavior change communication are jokingly called “a shitty NGO type film”⁴⁸ by staff. When I enquired further on what such a film was it was explained to me as “*informative without being emotive...And a didactic informational film has only one role to play but a documentary film that is well made with different layers can get a response that very little other media can manage to do I think.*”⁴⁹

I argue that STEPS can use their craft as filmmakers to (re)position themselves. This is one way of exuding power through cultural and symbolic capital. Additional ways that STEPS works beyond the framework of traditional NGO practices is through their ties to the documentary film world allowing for autonomy from the confines of mainstream development practices. Their agenda in these cases are not dominated by what is coming from above but rather through their own agency as they use their social networks and previous skill-sets to produce innovative projects. These projects in turn give them access to unique resources in the form of funding and forming new relational structures, all things that can feed into the overall work of the organization.

⁴⁸ Interview with Anonymous STEPS Staff Member, STEPS Office, Cape Town, 17th September 2015

⁴⁹ Interview with Anonymous STEPS Staff Member, STEPS Office, Cape Town, 17th September 2015

Through endeavors largely initiated by Don the traditional documentary world enters the house of STEPS. Don is always working in various time zones going on fundraising trips or sitting on pitch committees and juries for major film festivals while also mentoring young filmmakers in various industry workshops globally but more concentrated in Europe. He has been behind the global documentary projects *WhyDemocracy?* and *WhyPoverty?* and attributes his taste for larger scale projects to his progression from producing the films in Lesotho to the regional Southern African project on truth and reconciliation where Don says “[he] could start seeing the greater impact you have when you have a slightly larger project.”⁵⁰ After the *Steps for the Future* initiative he envisioned a similar project being done on a global platform birthing the ideas for the aforementioned. The project was “pitched a bit high,”⁵¹ he admitted and did not have many of the methodologies used by STEPS as components though what it did give the organization was notoriety that complimented the earlier success of the HIV/AIDS campaign. It would be another series under the STEPS umbrella that was critically acclaimed further enhancing the symbolic capital of the organization.

⁵⁰ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

⁵¹ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015



AfriDocs doing a live broadcast on location in Durban during Durban International Film Festival 2015 (Photo credit: Patrice Carter)

Don's follow-up has been *AfriDocs* the broadcast initiative that airs weekly on DStv and GOtv, two major satellite and terrestrial networks across sub-Saharan Africa. The expressed mission of the project was to create a platform for African documentary filmmakers to have their films seen by African audiences and to create an audience for African documentaries.

These projects are presented in new proposals as accomplishments by the organization giving them a level of clout that can be used as a legitimizing endeavor. As such, it can be argued that they also bring in additional funding to the organization that can be combined with other funding to cover running cost. It also continues to reinforce STEPS as experts in media. And lastly, resources produced from the larger projects can be utilized in other projects such as *Steps for the Future*. All in all, it gives them a level of emancipation allowing them to operate outside of the confines of mainstream development.

6.3.2 Repositioning power using development discourse

“We challenge stigma and discrimination towards vulnerable people. Not like behavior change communication...It is about prevention also but it’s about empowering people to make informed decisions. But me, I, don’t want to tell people what to do. I think that’s the difference. We are not saying ‘don’t do that.’” – Marianne⁵²

Marianne’s statement continues to show their “anti-dominant” ethos and how they perceive themselves in the field. If we consider her statement as representative of STEPS’ attempts in the field to circumvent a certain form of mainstream development discourse and practice and account for their success in the field using these approaches than arguably this can be seen as developing up or passing on ideas from the peripheral to the center.

Though funding dynamics can have negative impact on NGOs, Pearce (2010:631) says that it can be used to “facilitate processes, interactions, and possibilities.” Indeed the agenda is set from above, informed by reports from government and institutional bodies but another way to (re)position and shift power in development discourse and practice that I have seen in STEPS’ work is through their use of local stories as the springboard to their advocacy work. In essence, STEPS is not prescribing an ill fit solution to or an unwanted agenda on to the local experience but rather are gaining insight from the local experience and moving this knowledge along the hierarchy of power in development through funder reports and impact assessments. This is another way of developing up and shifting power considering the call for intervention comes from within the community to be intervened upon.

Mamdani (1990:359) addressing the debates on human rights as a Western construct says quite pointedly “[w]ithout the experience of sickness, there can be no health...[arguing thusly,]...[w]herever oppression occurs – and no continent has had a monopoly over this phenomenon in history – there must come into being a conception of rights.” Additionally, Vargas (2012:3) says “[i]f, for example, the discourse of human rights is

⁵² Interview with Marianne, STEPS office, Cape Town, 27th August 2015

often deployed to appease donors whose values and beliefs are Western and liberal, it is also a discourse that is appropriated, circulated, and transformed by local populations who may see in the adherence to a set of international norms a way to interpellate history and to challenge a hostile state and unequal local and global economic relations.” Accordingly, the protagonist of STEPS’ films utilize the tools informed by dominant development discourses that they are able to access through the NGO to advocate for rights they feel entitled to. As such, development discourse can be used as an empowering tool by weaker actors and beneficiaries using its mechanisms creatively to speak back to its institutions. “*Why LGBTI, why...is that one of [the] focuses now?*” I asked Don during an interview session. He replied:

“It’s another situation of injustice, it also affects many people, and it’s been kept quiet for so long, has been hidden for so long but it’s such an integral part of life for people and because we know people who are in the LGBTI community and also because they have kind of challenged us to say “well why aren’t you doing something about it?”⁵³

In the case of LGBTI rights advocacy and awareness in Lesotho for instance, Sheriff, the transgender protagonist of the STEPS produced participatory film *Man in Me*, did not need persuasion from the organization to advocate for his rights within the community. STEPS came in as a means to support his existing advocacy work. This, in essence, is STEPS’ attempts to speak to the local experience – what *the people* want. Though they are conserving the overall development discourse this is also one way that the development food chain absorbs the local experience and ideas into its framing and practices. This is also a showing of how stakeholders at the bottom adapt development discourse and practice to their specific context.

⁵³ Interview with Don, STEPS office, Cape Town 15th October 2015

6.3.3 The field of partner networks

“We are more like service providers. They like our methodology” - Marianne⁵⁴

NGOs, “are intermediary organisations engaged in funding or offering other forms of support to communities and other organisations [sic]” to the point of at times sustaining the existence of smaller entities like grassroots organizations (GROs) (Goddard and Assad, 2006:377). As such, power dynamics can be seen at play in these sort of relational structures not only from NGO to GRO but the legitimacy of an NGO can be strengthened by means of their access to the “local” (Fisher, 1997:454). As Fisher (1997:454) asserts “NGOs are praised and valued for connections to local communities and the grass roots, whether these connections are direct, or indirect through the GROs they service.” This connection to the local also shifts power to the NGO and with STEPS, this is further enhanced by their function as providers of resources that cannot be easily accessed or produced by smaller NGOs.

The *STEPS for the Future* office is always a busy place of strategic planning. On many occasions where I hung out with Marianne and Elaine I would find them engrossed in a session discussing one of the several partner organization they work with. This planning usually involved retrospective, ongoing projects or prospective insights and ideas for the year or years ahead. During one session I observed a call between Marianne and Elaine with our independent facilitator who works in Botswana. During the call, the question was asked, “do you have issues in Botswana like that? Girls getting pregnant?” Elaine asked. “Loads. In the news there is a surge in dropouts because of pregnancy in Botswana,” she answered. The suggestion was made to send her *Mother at Fifteen, Steps for the Future’s* new participatory film from Malawi.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Interview with Marianne, STEPS office, Cape Town 11th September 2015

⁵⁵ Conversation observed during fieldwork, STEPS office, Cape Town, 16th September 2015

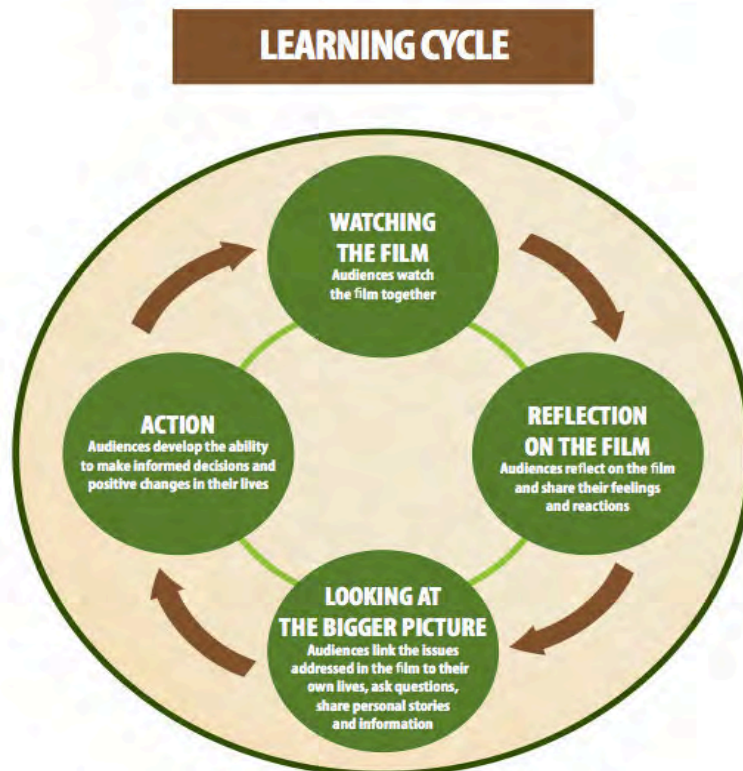


Elaine (left) and Marianne (right) discussing *Steps for the Future* projects (Photo credit: Patrice Carter)

Because *Steps for the Future* is the most active community engagement project under the STEPS umbrella, its work is synonymous with the name of the organization. Most documentaries produced despite the project can make its way to the “suitcase” as they call their catalogue of films and resources. STEPS, the organization, conducts its work through a large partner network, the *Steps for the Future* project has the largest batch in this pool. The network of partner organizations are closely associated with the foundational HIV/AIDS project where such a network was conceptualized as a means to distribute the films for outreach. These strategic partnerships are key components to STEPS’ declared strategy and a strong selling point in proposals to funders. For STEPS’ part, they provide the production of resources (films, some being participatory, and facilitation guides) and capacity building including training of trainers (TOTs), training of facilitators (TOFs) and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for the organizations. In return, the partners act as proxies for the methodology giving STEPS (and as an extension, the donors) entry into communities and their gatekeepers that they would not have the capacity to reach. At present there are roughly five countries in the STEPS

active partner network outside of South Africa: Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Botswana, Zambia.

Most partners in the network have HIV/AIDS as their core theme but create interventions that deal with underlying issues surrounding the disease, aligning well with STEPS multi-cause approach. Take for instance, the Malawi partner organization that STEPS partnered with to produce the participatory film, *Mother at Fifteen*. The film centers on teenage pregnancy that is a key factor in high infection rates in the area where the organization does its work. The beneficiaries range from characters in the films to the communities where the films are screened. The Learning Cycle is used in the framework for all facilitated screenings: Watch the film; Reflection on the film; Looking at the bigger picture; Action.



The Learning Cycle illustration used in STEPS' facilitator's guides.

I conjecture that, to a funder, this network and project are impressive and legitimates STEPS, giving them power and a strategy to navigate the competition within the sector

by positioning themselves as a strong collective. In terms of STEPS' partnership networks, however, I have also observed the hierarchical position of power that the organization has over its networks as an intermediary NGO. Though the abuse of power was not observed, I did recognize forms of paternalism over some partners and their deep dependency on capital and capacity building. Overall, the development food chain that represents relational structures of power from one tier to the next is illustrated through STEPS' partner networks.

6.4 Conclusion

As has been shown there are challenges in the field that create an unstable environment for NGOs to operate in. What has also been exhibited is how STEPS' decision-makers have strategies that are demonstrative of "sailing" (Vigh, 2009) in the precarity of the contentious development field. I have been able to observe conservative strategies displayed through practices such as their incorporation of the funder agenda as well a form of navigation through their structure as a multi-cause NGO. I have also observed subversive strategies employed by their use of non-didactic storytelling as a media intervention. Though this strategy incorporates mainstream development discourses, such as human rights, it does so in order to reclaim and redirect the power residing within dominant development structures. It has been shown that the agency and habitus of key decision-makers within STEPS has been intrinsic to the success of this 'counter' activity.

I have stipulated that they are able to shift power in various ways. Through their network of partners within Southern Africa they go from being the weak subject to exuding their own level of power. They further mobilize their power through the instrumentalization of their auxiliary practices and habitus derived from their work in documentary film that are outside of the development field yet can still be housed under the STEPS umbrella. I conclude that the habitus of the key decision-makers that were formed within the apartheid struggle and brought into the development field has informed their agency and has allowed for a certain type of capital that has been instrumental in their potential to navigate and survive within the development space.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

I have gone down this path of critical interrogation in order to understand the contestable field of development from the vantage point of the people who constitute the space. Using STEPS as a case study to understand the dynamics of the overall sector gives the researcher somewhat of a microscopic view of power dynamics within the broader field. We have come a long way from the “historical processes of modernity and capitalism” (Ziai, 2007:19) that pre-dated and informed Truman’s speech to a period where development is a household collection of rhetoric and practice so engrained in the fabric of society and our daily lives. Escobar (1995:5) aptly posits: “Development had achieved the status of a certainty in the social imaginary.” As Ziai (2007:19) asserts, development has become “a real and effective social force, transforming the economic, social, cultural and political reality of the societies in question.” Now that is *power*.

Foucault (1980) explains that power can be held by anyone. Choosing to frame my study using concepts of *navigation* (Vigh, 2009) and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) to explore various levels of power helped me to understand how my participants negotiate their position in the hierarchy of the development field. Through my ethnography I have concluded that STEPS have chosen to conserve some discourses and practices within development largely centered on human rights while subverting other rules such as prescriptive media advocacy tools, opting to use local stories that do not offer directives and are meant to spark debate.

They also can exude power from their perceived *weaker* position in the development food chain (the hierarchy of relational structures) as an intermediary NGO that oversees a network of partner organizations throughout Southern Africa. Additionally, through key decision-makers, they maintain strong ties to industries outside of the development field allowing for a form of autonomy from the broader development sector. As such, STEPS key decision-makers have largely been able to maintain their habitus that they entered the development space with though it has been transformed and socialized since their entry. In this way, I have concluded that though my participants play to the fiddle of the dominant voices in development in some areas, they are not simply actors waiting to be

acted upon but rather have a level of agency and power that gives them some form of autonomy within their confined role in the development story – practices, I posit, that are formulated and regulated by the habitus of key decision-makers and transferred to their company ethos.

Will they adapt and adjust their approach if threatened with lack of funding? Will funders move away from media advocacy as an approach to rights-based development? This is to be seen but at present STEPS is funded by several donor bodies that still believe in their brand of media advocacy. Overall, the organization is an active part of the development apparatus as a Southern NGO that has been able to balance their “anti” rhetoric with status quo operations. As for the individuals at STEPS, a passion for the type of work done along with the very organization constructed by a specific handful of people make dealing with the precarity of the sector worth it to staff members. Their collectivist ethos has framed this for them. As one staff member told me, *“It’s worthwhile, its worth the effort, its worth the little money...we know that we make a difference. I think that’s the important thing for most of us.”*⁵⁶

Though not claiming generalizations, I attempted to show how these particular practitioners have come to be and in so doing, this may allow for insights on ways that shifts of power in discourse and practice are possible within the broader context of development. As it pertains to South Africa, researching development practices in the country have largely been a historical framing of the birth of the sector from pre-post apartheid and the present crisis in this resource starved third sector (Patel, 2012; Habib and Taylor, 1999; Coalition on Civil Society Resource Mobilisation, 2012 *for some examples*), allowing this dissertation to also make a contribution to overall studies within this space. STEPS’ journey gives some insights on the power dynamics and strategies used to navigate, in so much as an organization can help it, in the confines of a restrictive development space.

⁵⁶ Interview with Anonymous Staff Member, STEPS office, Cape Town, 25th September 2015

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